

Daisy's Diary

by John J. Dwyer

ACT I

Scene One

The stage is dark. Gradually, the sound of a Texas radio announcer becomes audible.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: For once, a ballyhooed showdown has lived up to everything it was cranked up to be, as arch rivals Crooked Trail and Lonesome Dove have staged a fierce contest for the conference championship. Six players have left the game with injuries, two of 'em in ambulances. Crooked Trail's two-touchdown lead has melted away and Lonesome Dove leads the Armadillas by four points, with just twenty seconds remaining in this mud-and-blood-spattered last regular season game. The winner goes to district next week. But now it looks as though Crooked Trail suffered the worst injury o' the game—o' the season for that matter. Big Shane Rankin, the Armadillas' two-time All-Conference linebacking thunderbolt, is down, Dr. Crockett and another stretcher are out on the field, and Hank, it looks like that knee that has bothered him since mid-season is in the worst shape yet—and all that with the Armadillas on the Jackelopes' seven-yard line, but facing fourth and goal.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Well Bud, that knee has already cost him scholarship offers from Tech, Baylor, and Ole Miss, among others. He was due for surgery immediately after the season. But that knee is twisted like a pretzel. And with Shane and startin' tailback Ronell Peters out, not even the stoutest Armadilla heart can bet on a score here against that stingy Jackelope defense, which has given up exactly one first down in the second half.

The crowd noise rises. Band music pounds the classic Texas school fight song "Grandioso" in the background.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Gemini Christmas, Hank, it almost looks like Shane, Dr. Crockett, and one o' the Crooked Trail assistant coaches are in a fistfight!

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Good grief, Bud, Coach Grunden had to call his last timeout.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Hank—they're wrappin' Shane's knee. I think he's gonna go!

The crowd roars.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Incredible, Bud. There's no Texas high school

rivalry more legendary, especially among private Christian schools, than Crooked Trail and Lonesome Dove. As well you know, on the football field, sentiments have sometimes fared somewhat less than, let's say, Christian charity.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: But Hank, if Shane Rankin, in probably the last game o' his career, win or lose, hammers that ball into the end zone—or blocks the way for quarterback Colt Shahan or someone else to do so—it's got my vote as the greatest play in a storied history o' games full o' great plays and players.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Bud, Coach Grunden is shakin' his head; he's already got a backup in there for Rankin, but Shane is wavin' him off and shovin' his teammates into the huddle.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *as the crowd roars again, off stage*: Heaven above, Bud, they're gonna let him stay in.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: I don't think they're *lettin'* him stay in, Hank—he won't come out, the players are circlin' around him and shovin' the backup away, and Coach Grunden doesn't have another time out to burn!

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Oh Lord, Bud. Help us, Lord.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Help us, God. Help Shane.

Now the announcers can barely be heard over the crowd.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Shahan's bringin' them up to the line. Looks like the entire Jackelope defense is packed into the middle waitin' for Shane Rankin.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: The boy can barely stand up, and I can seem him grimacin' in pain from here, Hank, bless his heart.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: There's the snap! It goes to Rankin, up the middle. Good Lord, look at the hittin'. Dominguez blitzes in from the corner.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Good grief, Hank, he slugged Shane in the face!

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: But he's still goin', draggin' one, two, now three men with him, to the three, the two.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Go, Shane, go!

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: One of 'em kicks him hard in his bad knee—but he falls across the goal line into the endzone! That's the ball game and the Armadillas win!

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Oh, Hank, Shane Rankin has given Armadillo fans a lifetime of memories these past four years, but this is the greatest feat of all.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Why Hank, you boys won two state championships here in the '70s—can you think of a greater play in the history o' the program?

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: None. Not by me, not by Johnny Calhoun, our quarterback who went on to be a third-team All American in college, not by anyone.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 1, *off stage*: Oh Lord, though, Bud, the boy's hurt. This time he's layin' still on the ground. Here comes that ambulance again. This time they're drivin' it right out onto the field.

RADIO ANNOUNCER 2, *off stage*: Winnin's a hard thing sometimes, Hank.

ACT I

Scene Two

The left main half of the stage, the wood-paneled, stone-fireplaced family room of the Rankin family's handsome rural home. The room contains various furnishings, including a leather reclining chair, matching ottoman, matching couch, a table or two, a rack holding several cowboy hats, and a hutch. Middle-aged Pastor JAKE RANKIN, his wife DAISY RANKIN, handsome, tall, broad-shouldered, eighteen-year-old SHANE RANKIN, and tall, slender, fourteen-year-old EMILY RANKIN are gathered in various seats around the dining table fronting the fireplace. All except Emily sit; she stands in front of the fireplace, holding forth in a strange, silly, part-nasal, part-throaty voice.

DAISY, *irritated, in a soft Texas drawl*: For goodness sakes, darlin'—a product that deals with indigestion from *broc-coli*?

EMILY, *speaking in a silly, throaty, alter ego voice*: But Mama, it's classy—not gassy. Just like on the ad for Beano.

JAKE, *attempting to imitate Emily*: Classy, not gassy.

EMILY, *getting up, running over to scold him*: Oh Daddy, you sound like that Muppet. Suddenly, Shane, brace and all, rises, lifts Emily up, throws her over his shoulders, and parades around the room, laughing and limping all the while, as she pounds his back and kicks his front. Shane Rankin, you big monkey, put me down—ahhh! Right now, ya big jerk! Ahhh! The harder she kicks and slugs, the louder Shane—and Jake—laugh. If you don't put me down right now, I'm gonna bite you right on your—

DAISY: Children!

This silences the room. Everyone, including Jake, turns toward her, eyes wary and mouths taut. Then they all erupt into laughter, and Shane tosses Emily onto the couch. She springs to her feet.

EMILY, *finger pointing up into his face*: No wonder all the girls at school think you're a goofball. You may be one of the biggest guys in school now, but your brain is one of the smallest, and you've got less couth than a five-year-old.

DAISY: Emily Rankin, go to your room. You stirred this whole thing up by blowing the cat with the hair dryer and wrestling with the dog on the dining room table and doing that insipid voice—

EMILY: Beano, Mom—it is the voice of Beano.

JAKE: Goodnight, darlin'.

EMILY: But Dad— *She sees his "Pastor's" face, then makes a pouting exit US and out of the room.*

DAISY, *noticing Shane exiting US after Emily*: Stay away from her door, Shane Rankin! *She rubs her throat after hollering.*

EMILY, *loudly, in "Beano" voice, off stage*: Yeah, you kicked it off the hinges last summer—you big oaf!

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah, when you sent the whole school my e-mail to Jenny after her jaw surgery!

EMILY, *off stage*: You mean your love letter!

SHANE, *off stage*: It wasn't a love letter!

EMILY, *frightened, as it sounds like Shane is moving toward her, off stage*: It was an accident, Shane, I told you a hundred times!

DAISY: Shane, get back in here this minute!

A door slams and locks off stage.

EMILY, *shouting mockingly, further muffled, apparently from within her room*: Yeah, you animal—or I'll tell Jenny!

SHANE, *amidst the sound of a fist slamming against a door, off stage*: Spoiled little brat!

Jake stands up quickly to leave the room—but not quickly enough.

DAISY, *glaring at Jake*: They're just like you, pastor or not—both of them!

ACT I

Scene Three

A lowered forestage, where—the main stage behind darkened—miscellaneous scenes will occur, this first on the front porch of the Rankin family's rural home. Daisy rocks by herself in one of two rocking chairs, knitting socks, her face serious.

DAISY, *to audience*: Poor, pretty Kim Chastain. Weepin' into the phone. Her husband, once a deacon at our church, now choosin' to keep living with that—with his twenty-two-year-old secretary. How many Chastains there been through the years. We'd best remember the Crooked Trail Bible Church is a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints. And the Garners and their problems, after that fifth miscarriage. If they could just have one child, that would help them so. Least it keeps a person's mind off that the world's hardest unpaid job—"Pastor's Wife." Things I can't say to folks and probably not even to my journal, but only to You, Lord. Like catchin' the slings and arrows and snubs of the critical and jealous and small-minded, especially when it's about your husband. Or the unkept promises of lay volunteers who seem to break their word often as they keep it. Or when folks, sometimes good friends like the Baileys or McCloskeys, leave the church in a huff, or worse, without even a by-your-leave, and leave that hole in you that never quite fills up, even when the Pastor's Wife and the Pastor both can only smile and act happy when we're cryin' on the inside. And it keeps your mind off these worn out arthritic hands, or this sore throat that's returned like an unwelcome in-law, or that achin' tooth, or the two thousand dollar root canal bill it may cost. Yep, it'll be interesting to see how God provides for that. Thank you, Lord, that the unknown for us is not if but how. *She squints into the distance.* Goodness, the McClanahans have their winter wheat in already over there across the farm-to-market. Or I guess it's the Hansens now, since the McClanahan boys moved away and there sister married Bob Hansen. Farm-to-market—most folks living around here now don't even know what "FM" means, or ever meant, in FM 2448. Back yonder it meant how you got to Justin or Ponder or Sanger with your produce on Saturdays. Course, why should I complain, when it's the Lord bringin' 'em out to us and the church. *Something catches her eye away off to one side and she lets out a loud whistle.* Buddy! Leave those bunnies alone! Labs love chasin' bunnies. Then there's the question of who ministers to the pastor. Growin' up in our little Presbyterian church, the Presbytery, for all their warts, was there when the pastor needed help. Not so with these non-denominational churches like ours, which are fillin' up Texas now. Part of why they are is they reflect us Texans and our ways, for better or worse. We're a proud, independent, loud people with lots of opinions who don't need or want anyone to look over our shoulders to make sure we're doin' things right—or to look down from a lofty perch somewhere else. *She knits for a moment in silence.* Well, it's true we don't want anyone to do that, but it may not be true that we don't need anyone. Hmm. Lots to write in my diary tonight. *Someone's head appears for an instant through one of the windows. It catches her eye.* There he is again. Been hoverin' about on the edge of my vision last couple of days, just like he has since he could walk

and there was somethin' he wanted to talk to me about rather than anyone in the world, even his daddy or sister. He's not even watchin' *Band of Brothers* in there with his daddy. My two hundred-fifteen pound baby boy. *She speaks over her shoulder toward the house.* Shane, honey. I've got these socks ready for you.

Shane limps sheepishly DS from the house onto the porch, sporting a large knee brace.

DAISY, *handing him the repaired socks:* Set yourself down, son.

SHANE, *sitting in the other rocker:* Thanks, Mom. Saw Buddy lumberin' along with another jackrabbit hangin' out his mouth when I got back from the hospital the other day.

DAISY, *rubbing her throat, clearing it, and pulling her sweater over it, then half-smiling:* Bad for that jackrabbit, but good for my begonias. *She nods toward the front yard, then glances sideways at Shane.* From the looks of things, it may be a long season for that basketball team without you, honey.

SHANE: Aw, come on, Mom. Don't make me feel any worse than I already do.

DAISY: I'm sorry, dear. I just don't think folks realized how important you were last year, what with Colt and his three-pointers and all. Anyhow, a little dose of humility won't hurt the boy. Without you cloggin' up the middle, he's hard-pushed to even get off a decent shot.

SHANE: Mom, I'll be alright.

DAISY, *her voice tightening:* It's just—you worked so hard for so long.

SHANE: Mom, remember how Daddy always reminded us of Stonewall Jackson's favorite passage?"

DAISY: I know. All things—

SHANE, *nearly eliciting a giggle from her while using his old socks like a conductor's baton to make his point:* All things work together for good to those who love the Lord and are the called according to His purpose. All things, Mom, not some or most or the ones we agree with.

DAISY: Somethin's comin', isn't it, Shane?

SHANE: I been thinkin' on that verse, Mom, thinkin' on it a lot, at night and all when I couldn't sleep and was cryin'. I would've crawled bare-legged across a field o' glass to suit up and play ball with Eli Manning at Ole Miss, and I couldn't for the longest time to figure why God would take away from me the most important thing in my life when there were so many other things He could've taken that didn't matter a rip. Why did He take the most important one, I kept wondering. *She stares at him, tears filling her*

eyes. Then it hit me. *He breaks into a smile.* What you and Daddy always taught us, Mom. About what is the most important thing of all in our lives.

DAISY, *chin quivering*: The Lord.

SHANE: That's right! And once I remembered that, it was clear sailin'.

DAISY: What do you mean, Shane?

SHANE: Mom, soon as school's out, I want to join the Marines. (*She stares at him; after a moment, he gets up and begins to pace the porch.*) I know it's crazy, Mom, but remember Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner from *Chariots of Fire*? How he spent all that time, sacrificed just about everything in his life, to run the quarter-mile race in the Olympics, because he felt that's what God wanted him to do? (*She nods.*) Or Jim Elliot, going to the savages in the jungle in Ecuador? But it didn't work out for either of them—leastways how they planned--or for most of the other heroes of the faith you and Daddy always taught us about. But Mom—something better, more perfect always did work out—all things work together for good, Mom.

DAISY: But—college.

SHANE: The Marines will help pay for my college after I've been with them a few years.

DAISY: Ah, you've been doing homework for more than English and Physics.

SHANE: They come around to all the schools now, and the one that's been talkin' to me is really cool, he played fullback for Southlake Carroll and he's a Christian. Listen, Mom. *He kneels, gently grabbing her arthritic hands.* You're the one I wanted to tell first. That is, you're the first one I wanted to ask permission. I can't run the way I could, but I already checked, and my knee will heal up good enough for the Marines. You and Daddy always told me God made me a leader, that other boys listen to me and respect me. Well, Mom, where do other boys need leaders worse now than in Afghanistan?

DAISY: Didn't your hero Pat Tillman join?

SHANE: He's an Army Ranger, but yeah, he gave up fame 'n glory 'n a pro football contract worth millions o' dollars to go defend our country in Afghanistan. But Jed Cody's brother's already in the Marines, an' Jed says they're startin' to say Saddam Hussein and *Iraq* may be the biggest threat of all.

DAISY: What?

SHANE: Jed's brother wrote him they think Hussein's got him a stockpile o' chemical and nuclear weapons, and he's buildin' more—and he may use 'em on us. *She*

stares in disbelief. After 9/11, Mom, who knows what could happen? The world's all different now.

DAISY, *lowering her head, tired:* Talk to Daddy. I'll support whatever he says.

SHANE, *hugging her:* I love you, Mom!

ACT I

Scene Four

For a moment, the entire stage is dark. Gradually, the sounds of the country in early morning rise. A dim light rises over the lowered forestage and we see Shane and his middle-aged father, Pastor JAKE RANKIN, crouch, holding shotguns and wearing galoshes, coats, and hats.

SHANE, *whispering:* Colt Shahan got him his deer limit last week down in the Hill Country.

JAKE, *biting off a chunk of beef jerky, then offering the remainder of the strip to Shane, who scarfs it:* I heard. Didn't he get him a twenty-three point buck down there a while back?"

SHANE: He sure did. That was the week after he almost fell out of the Ferris Wheel at the County Fair while tryin' to do a hand-stand on it when his seat got to the top.

JAKE: Wadn't drinkin' before he went up there, was he?

SHANE: No, dad.

JAKE: To be from such laid-back folks, it never ceases to amaze me how, uh, spirited that boy is.

SHANE, *laughing:* You mean wild, crazy, insane, and idiotic, Dad?

JAKE: Shhh, son. Those ducks don't need to be any smarter than us than they already are.

SHANE: Well, judgin' from our own experience, Dad, there is such a thing as crazy grandparents too, right? Skippin' the sane and sober generation—that would be you and Mom—and visiting the sins of the grandfathers, if you will, on unsuspecting young people like me and Emily?

JAKE, *grinning wryly:* I don't think too many folks get skipped with too much around

here. Especially smart mouths. *He chomps for a moment on more jerky.* Course, drinkin' the way all those Presbyterian boys—including the pastor's son--do'll tend to have that effect.

SHANE: Well, not one of those boys' parents—including the pastor's son's--don't have well-stocked liquor cabinets.

JAKE: Still beats me how the Presbyterians can know Bible doctrine so well, yet be so wrong on drinkin' and baptism and especially the end times. *Shane laughs—quietly—then they chew and crouch and wait as an owl hoots near the edge of the woods behind them.*

SHANE: I never like getting' up at two in the mornin' and soakin' knee-deep in freezin' water, but I'm always glad I did.

JAKE: Well, you always did good at duck-huntin', son. You always did well at anything you put your mind to.

For a moment, nothing sounds, not even the owl.

SHANE: You think I'll make a good Marine, Dad?

JAKE: Why, I expect so, son, yes I do.

SHANE: From what I've read and Jed Cody, who's been in for a year, told me, I think I will. Still, it's fear of the unknown, I guess.

JAKE, *peering at the first hint of lightning*: You absolutely sure you want to do this, son?

SHANE: Sure, Dad. Yes sir, I'm sure. Why did you ask that?

JAKE: I don't know, son.

SHANE: Don't you think it's right?

JAKE, *pausing*: When it's my son who's going, it makes me think a little harder--a lot harder, actually--about what I really believe. But yes, I think your joining the Marines is honorable, and I think us going wherever we need to, to shut down the terrorists, yes, I think that is right. And your joining the Marines to do—well, I didn't know it was possible for a man to be so proud of his son.

SHANE: You know, Dad, all I'm doin' is what you raised me to do.

ACT I

Scene Five

The right main half of the stage, the front portion of the Crooked Trail Bible Church. Far right are the glass lectern “pulpit,” chancel area, and a couple of cushioned chairs. Two U.S. flags hang on the front wall, extreme right, behind the pulpit and on either side of a large Christian cross. Emily sits in the front row facing the pulpit and closest to us. Other people sit around and behind her, including attractive, middle-aged MAGGIE HIGHTOWER. Her best girlfriend, AMY CALHOUN, sits to her left and their classmate, naïve, fresh-faced TOMMY O’ROURKE, sits directly behind her, next to ROG HUSSAINI, a thin and unassuming new refugee student from Iraq. In the row ahead and a couple of seats down sits KYLIE HIGHTOWER, Maggie’s daughter and like Emily a tall, beautiful, and talented basketball player. Emily’s and Kylie’s fathers are close friends, but the girls do not get along. The unseen but pulsating sound of the church’s “worship band,” replete with drums and electric guitars, permeates the scene.

EMILY, *to herself*: Folks are so united now! Wish Mom didn’t still have that sore throat and was here. It’s just like after 9/11, when we all flew flags at our houses. Even Bill Weatherford, the deacon who apologized to Daddy for spreading false rumors about him behind his back, and Jim Dickinson, too, the elder who tried to get Daddy replaced last year. *She stares over at Kylie.* Except for that snotty Kylie Hightower. Look at her, she wishes she wasn’t even here. Bet she wouldn’t be if her parents didn’t make her come. She’s just jealous of me because it’s my brother everyone’s makin’ over. And ‘cause it was me and not her scored the winning basket in our summer basketball league championship. *She tosses her head toward the front.* I’m not gonna look her direction any more because I don’t want to have to smile back in case she smiles at me—it’d probably be a fake smile, anyhow, just to look good since everyone else is doing it.

The worship band strikes up America as Jake, Shane, his friend and elder HOLT HIGHTOWER, and Holt’s son JOSH HIGHTOWER--all except Jake wearing U.S. military uniforms--march down the aisle, Holt in the lead and carrying the American flag.

EMILY: Goodness, look at all those ribbons and medals on Mr. Hightower’s uniform!

AMY: Yeah, Kylie said he got some of those flying his fighter jet into The “Highway of Death.”

EMILY: Highway of Death?

AMY: Yeah, she said it was in the Persian Gulf War, and supposedly we took out over 100,000 Iraqi soldiers that day.

EMILY: One hundred *thousand*? People?

AMY: Well—Iraqis. Saddam Hussein’s soldiers. I heard her daddy told some of

the men in the church he reckoned he may have taken out a thousand or more himself that day.

EMILY: A thousand or more what?

KYLIE, *suddenly leaning around toward Emily, apparently having eavesdropped on the entire conversation*: Iraqis, doofus!

AMY: Shh, Kylie!

KYLIE, *dropping her voice, speaking to both Amy and Emily*. Shh yourself, Amy. My daddy's been goin' to Washington D.C. a lot lately, and let's just say I hear things sometimes I'm not supposed to and we're fixin to get into a war with Iraq.

EMILY: You mean Iran? Daddy says we've never gotten along with Iran. Plus, aren't we already fighting somebody else?

KYLIE: No, Iraq. And yow, we're fightin' the Taliban in Afghanistan.

EMILY: But—Shane—you don't think he'll have to go to any of those places, do you?

KYLIE: Not unless he gets lucky!

TOMMY, *leaning forward, wide-eyed, but soft-spoken*: Kylie, is it true your brother Josh flies a Blackhawk?

KYLIE: Sure is—and he knows no fear. He's been in battles all over Afghanistan, wherever the fighting's heaviest.

Jake steps up to the lectern, and the other men flank him on either side. Holt Hightower still holds the flag aloft.

TOMMY: Uh, y'all, this is Rog Hussaini. He's a new student in our class at school this year. He's from Iraq and he's stayin' with Paul Habib's family, who have some relatives from Iraq and Jordan. *Emily and the others stare at Rog*. Oh, don't worry. He hates Saddam worse than we do. Saddam's men killed one of his relatives and threw some others into prison. Rog's parents sent him out of the country before Saddam drafted him into his army.

AMY: Wow. Cool. *She extends her hand to shake Rog's*. Nice to meet you.

ROG, *smiling broadly*: Hi.

EMILY: Hi, Rog,

ROG: Hello.

AMY: Welcome to Crooked Trail—and America, Rog.

ROG: Thank you. It's great to be here. It's great to be in America.

JAKE, *praying before the congregation*: Gracious heavenly Father, we gather before you this morning, cognizant that all we have comes from Your gracious hand. Lord, we ask You today, and in the days ahead, to work in and through us, to bring about Your purposes on the earth, and in our lives, that all we say, think, and do would be pleasing in Your sight. And we thank You for these faithful servants who join us today, men who have—and will—give sacrificially of themselves, that Your precious gospel may be allowed to spread unhindered throughout the world, including in those Muslim nations that live in spiritual darkness and, even if they do not realize it, hate You and Your son. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

CONGREGATION: Amen.

As Jake steps away from the lectern, Holt hands the flag to Dickinson.

HOLT: Good mornin', y'all.

CONGREGATION: Good morning!

HOLT: Wow, do y'all feel a sense of anticipation this mornin' like I do?

VARIOUS VOICES: Yes. Oh yeah. Amen.

HOLT, *turning back toward Jake*: Do you, Pastor Jake? *Jake nods, smiling. He looks toward Dickinson.* What's that, Dick? *He laughs, turns back to the congregation.* Goodness, I don't know if Pastor Jake'd appreciate that sentiment—but some of y'all might. Oh, I guess we can always edit it off the tape, right, Pastor? *Jake nods, some in the congregation laugh.* Well, Dick here says he has a real sense of anticipation today that Shane here is gonna kick some Arab—well I guess y'all get the drift, right! *General laughter and scattered applause rise from the congregation. Jake pats the smiling Shane on his back.* This young man, Shane Rankin—he is the living embodiment of why the United States of America is the greatest nation in the history of the world. When I look at Shane, here— *He chokes up.* —My hope is renewed in this land of ours, despite its abortions and homosexuality and decadent popular culture and liberal courts and high taxes and all its other problems.

VOICES IN CONGREGATION: Amen.

HOLT: Now I'm gonna really get choked up. *Several people in the congregation chuckle or laugh.* Most of y'all know Josh. Grew up in this church. Baptized when he was six years old. Maybe the best football player our school had till Shane here. Anything he did would've made his mother and me proud, but—followin' in my

footsteps, as a Marine pilot— *He chokes up again.* Well there I go again. You can tell from the spaghetti and hardware on his uniform after just four years that he's done as good in the Corps as he did everywhere else. Oh well, y'all came to here him speak, not me jabber and sob, so here he is—my boy—our boy—Captain Josh Hightower.

The congregation rises to its feet and roars its approval, for a full minute.

JOSH: Anything good I am it's 'cuz o' mom and dad. They taught me what was right, and that if ain't worth standin' up for, it ain't right. Right now, there's a whole lot in this world we need to be standin' up for. And it's guys like Shane Rankin that are doin' the standin', and provin' that America really is different from all the other nations. And ladies and gentlemen—and young people— *He looks right at Emily and her group.* —like our great Christian President George W. Bush—a native Texan, I might add—has often said, our enemies—the terr'ists and killers o' innocent men, women, and children by the thousands in scores o' countries around the world—they hate us not because we intrude on 'em or seek what they have or wish to force our ways on 'em; we don't want to do any of these things.

VOICE IN CONGREGATION: That's right.

JOSH: They hate us, ladies and gentlemen, 'cuz we're good 'n decent 'n honorable 'n brave, 'n not bullies or cowards or murderers, and they hate that about us, and that we love freedom and liberty and the rights o' all people, and they truly hate that.

VOICE IN CONGREGATION: Amen!

JOSH: I remember my dad sayin' how his favorite old commentator Paul Harvey used to say—though he said it about the Commies, not the Muslims—those guys really *are* different than we are. And I think Rush Limbaugh has said that, too, or somethin' very similar.

MAN IN CONGREGATION: Amen!

SECOND MAN IN CONGREGATION: Amen!

THIRD MAN IN CONGREGATION: Amen Rush!

JOSH, *motioning Shane up to him, then placing his hand on the boy's shoulder, but still speaking to the congregation:* So as you send forth—your best—remember that he follows in the wake of a long train of American heroes who knew that freedom ain't free, and who've fought and bled and died to defend freedom for those who had it, and to provide it to others who wanted it—and even to some who didn't. He goes out to defend His people, the Christian peoples of all lands—especially His shining beacon, America, and His still-chosen people, brave Israel, who God's enemies the Muslims still try with every breath they take to destroy. God bless you, God bless Shane, and may God bless

America, His last and greatest hope on earth!

The worship band begins to boom.

JAKE, *stepping quickly to the lectern next to Josh, speaking to the congregation:*
Follow the words on the big screens like usual.

CONGREGATION, *practically shouting, to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic."* Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword; His truth is marching on. Glory! glory, hallelujah! Glory! glory, hallelujah! Glory! glory, hallelujah! Our God is marching on.

ACT I

Scene Six

The Rankins' house, evening. Jake, Daisy, and Emily sit around the dining table eating supper.

JAKE: Dr. Collins at First Baptist even shot me an e-mail other day; said he wished he'd thought of the idea to preach a series on the Christian's duty to his country.

EMILY, *leaning toward Shane's empty chair:* It'd fit just right with that little brass army band they have performing now on Sunday mornings.

EMILY, *in Beano voice:* Beano thinks that's just a little over the top.

JAKE: Yeah, but he's got us licked on one thing. No one's gonna come up with a bigger American flag than the one he hung from the steeple of his church.

EMILY, *rising from the table:* Tommy said it's so big, they had had to reinforce the steeple to keep the flag from pulling it over and off the roof.

EMILY, *in Beano voice:* Beano thinks these people either forgot their medication or they need some.

DAISY: Emily Rankin, you and your smart mouth. Sit your little self back down here and finish your supper. Three rolls and no meat or vegetables?

EMILY, *sighing:* Mom--the last couple of months haven't exactly been the same around here without Shane.

DAISY: That's true, the goats and cows are about to starve to death.

EMILY, *insulted:* Mom, I've been busy with choir and basketball starting back up.

JAKE: Well I've got some news. My old buddy Al Clancy at KJES, that new Christian radio station, called today and said he got approval to start runnin' daily five-minute excerpts of my "Christian's Duty to His Country" series.

EMILY: Daddy!

DAISY, *clasping his hand*: Honey, that's wonderful.

JAKE: Al says dependin' on how long the series goes, they could keep runnin' the program indefinitely.

EMILY, *springing up from the table again*: I've got to go call Amy right now and tell her.

DAISY: Child, sit down here and eat your meat and vegetables. *Emily reaches for the rolls*. No ma'am, you do not get a fourth roll. Three's more than enough for the girl who told us last week she's officially in training for the state basketball championship.

JAKE: They're printin' up over ten thousand flyers with the station's "God and Country" theme and colors, and every one of 'em will include our program on the schedule.

DAISY: And Holt's gonna move in the next elder meetin' that we begin a capital campaign to expand the worship center?

JAKE: Holt had that consultant friend o' his out to look us over, and he said either we do somethin' like that, or I'm gonna be preachin' five services ever' Sunday. Now he and Jim Dickinson want to build a whole new worship center and turn the current one into a family life center. I'd say with Holt—and Pantheon—we can do it, though we'll take on some pretty good debt for a few years.

EMILY, *in Beano voice*: What! Our own gym? I can play basketball there every day!

DAISY: Daughter, I have told you to quit using that insipid voice when I'm in the room.

Daisy and Emily stare at one another for a moment.

EMILY, *peeping, in Beano voice*. Sor-ry.

DAISY: That's it, go to your room right now, Emily Rankin! Fifteen years old, and still acting like a third grader. *Emily storms US toward her bedroom*. And an obnoxious third-grader with too many opinions! *Daisy rises from the table coughing*.

JAKE, *with gravity*: Scott Callahan told me he's been coachin' girls basketball nearly twenty years, and our daughter has a chance to be one of the five best high school players he's ever had. *Daisy turns and stares at him*. Maybe—the *best* she's ever had.

DAISY, *sitting down, confused*: But—she hasn't even started her sophomore season. How can he tell that?

JAKE: Oh, he can tell. *A wave of coughing overtakes her.* Darlin', I thought you were gonna have an appointment with Dr. Matthews to have him look at that throat.

DAISY: I did. *Drinking some water, which slows the coughing.* Yesterday, as if anyone around here cares.

JAKE, *standing and going to her*. Daisy.

DAISY: I know. Everyone forgot, everyone's busy. He ran a test and we'll know in a day or two. *Just as he enfolds her in his arms, Daisy's cell phone rings. She ignores it for a moment.*

JAKE: Oh, your little friend Sharmonique called just before you got home.

DAISY: But I was with her all afternoon.

JAKE: She sounded pretty sad.

DAISY: You'd be sad too if your mom was a—prostitute—and your grandma who was raisin' you spent all the family's food stamps on cigarettes, and you weren't a hundred percent sure whether your two brothers who lived with you were really your brothers or maybe your nephews, but you *were* sure they were members of the Crips, unlike the four little children livin' in your apartment in the West Dallas projects. *She glances at her phone and recognizes a number.* Oh Jake, it's Maggie Hightower again.

JAKE: Hmm. She and—Holt—

DAISY, *grabbing the phone, but still speaking to him*: Is he still ever'where and doin' ever'thing for ever'body but her? *Rising slowly as she opens the phone.* Yeah, still. *Speaking into the phone.* Maggie? Hey, sweetie. *Listening for a moment, as she exits left.* Oh I'm so sorry, Maggie.

JAKE, *glancing at his watch*: Darn, the Budget Committee meeting! *He hustles up from his chair, grabs a cowboy hat off a rack that holds several of them, puts it on, and exits out of the room LS. He will typically put on a hat when he leaves the house, and be wearing one and put it back on the rack when he returns.*

After a moment, the console phone rings nearby, but no one remains to answer it. The message goes to the answering machine. Holt Hightower's voice booms forth.

HOLT, *off stage*: Jake, Holt here, Fox News just broadcast Vice President Cheney sayin' Saddam Hussein has weapons o' mass destruction, includin' nukes, and they're prob'ly intended for us! How long till Shane's outa boot camp?

ACT I

Scene Seven

The Rankins' dining room table, night. Emily sits alone, sipping hot chocolate. Jake walks in the door, wearing a cowboy hat, which he takes off and puts back on the rack.

JAKE: I tried to call you on the cell phone. The elders' meetin' ran late—we're definitely gonna have a new worship center—and we'll convert the old one into a family life center. You'll be able to play ball in there whenever you want. How'd it go? *She says nothing, just keeps sipping.* Emily, what happened?

EMILY: Oh, not much. We just beat North Dallas High School—for the first time ever, fifth-ranked team in the state in Class 5A public schools—by 25 points. Which was the same number I had.

JAKE: What?

EMILY, *standing up, walking away*: But since exactly no one from my family was there, it must not be very important, so good night.

JAKE: Well—where's your mother?

EMILY: In bed.

JAKE: Already?

EMILY, *exiting US, speaking in a subtly mocking tone*: She was tired from tutoring and taking out her little friend Sharmonica or Taliquila or whatever her goofy name is down in West Dallas.

Jake stares after her, sighs, then walks down toward the darkened forestage. He peers toward where Daisy's still form lies on a bed.

DAISY: Jake?

JAKE: Hey, sweetie. *As the forestage lightens just a bit, he leans down to kiss her on the forehead.* Thought you were still asleep. *He stares at her still form.* You alright?

DAISY, *clearing her throat, stifling a new cough*. I tried to wait up for you.

JAKE: I know, the meeting went late. More good stuff, though. Tomorrow, at 7:45 a.m. and 5:10 p.m., KJES radio starts airing the "Christian Patriot" series from my sermons. They want the first series to be all American military heroes. And honey? The new worship center is gonna happen—Holt kicked it off with a \$50,000 check from Pantheon!

Even Wes Risinger with all his naysayin' from bein' an American Airlines pilot had to bow down to that.

DAISY: I'm so happy for you. *She cups his chin with her bent hand.* And I am so proud of you, Jake Rankin. *He bends over and wraps her in his arms.* I so hate to be a bother, honey, especially at such a happy time, but—I--

JAKE: What, sweetie? What is it?

DAISY: The—the tests said it is malignant throat cancer. And it is in my lymph glands, too. It's—well, it seems to be in about ever'thing.

ACT II

Scene One

The Rankins' home again, night. It is quiet and dim. Jake walks in the front door, bundled up against the cold. He talks on his cell phone.

JAKE: Holt, it's just goin' great, brother. Our God and Country Capital Campaign Kickoff for the new worship center and all has brought in checks, cash, and pledges totaling nearly half a million dollars. KJES, the official "God and Country" station for the Metroplex, will get five percent o' that, about \$25,000, just like you worked out with 'em, for promoin' it. *He listens to Holt as he walks across to where Daisy lays sleeping and still, bundled on the folded-back recliner chair. He walks out and up the stairs.* Heck no they don't pay taxes on it, they're non-profit. And you're right, the Christian Patriot program hadn't hurt any of us. You're the man, Holt. *He listens to Holt and smiles.* Naw, you are. Daisy? Those meds have her knocked out again. I could've unleashed a couple shells from one o' my .12 gauge full choke Remingtons and she wouldn't o' heard it. *Pause.* Alright, talk atcha tomorrow. *He walks down to the again-darkened forestage.* Hmm—light comin' from Emily's room this late? *He peers into the darkness.* Why, she's got a laptop in there; that shouldn't be, this late.

He walks over to the lighted screen amidst the darkness. A soft harp-like sound comes from the computer.

JAKE: She's instant-messagin' with someone. I told her none o' that, it's like playin' with fire for these kids. *He leans over to the screen and reads the message.* It's from—Hottie Heath? *He reads the message.* I know, Kylie really seems to hate you, but that's the first time I ever heard o' her sayin' stuff that bad about you. At least, you're not the only one she trash talks. *He pauses, giving a slight shake of his head, then continues.* It's good your daddy's a pastor and mine's one o' his elders, because if it wadn't that way, you wouldn't be safe in the same room with me—

EMILY, *returning to the room:* Daddy! What! *She rushes to the computer, stares at the message, then screams.* Of all the times for you to come home and return to our lives! *Jake stands quietly.* Leave! Leave my room now.

JAKE: Are you gonna tell Heath good night, or am I? *She plops into the desk chair and cries.*

EMILY, *equal parts emotion and drama*: You're never here anymore. You don't even make most of my games, and I'm one of the top ten scorers in the whole state—as a tenth-grader, Daddy! *Jake says nothing.* And Mama—oh, Mama is so nice anymore, I can barely get furious with her!

JAKE: Furious with her?

EMILY: Yes! Prayin' for me, bein' sweet and patient like she's never been before, even though she's hurtin'. No matter what I do, I can't get her into an argument! Maybe she'll be some help soon as she decides to quit takin' it easy and get better! *Jake stares at her.* Nobody cares about me anymore. Even Shane ran off to who-knows-where. *She swings her head back to him, her eyes blazing.* Well I tell you what, Pastor Rankin, there's plenty o' folks out there that would love to have some of my time, even if you and the rest of my family don't. And it's not just Heath, though he's one o' the nicer ones. It's Colt Shahan, e-mailin' me from UT, and me only fifteen. And that modeling agency in Dallas. I know, I made Mom promise not to tell you, and I told them I couldn't—that you wouldn't let me. But anymore, I don't know what you have the right to tell me to do or not do. *She sits quiet for a minute, staring at the wall.* Anyways, that's my honest thoughts.

Jake stays still for a minute, then walks to her, bends down, and enfolds her in his arms. She sits motionless, like a stone.

JAKE: I am very sorry, Emily, I have failed you. I have failed us all. But I'm going to try to change that. *The harp sounds from the computer, indicating another instant message arriving. Emily peers at it.*

EMILY: Heath is wondering where I am, and if he offended me. He says he's sorry, he was tired and thinking goofy, and we should both go to sleep.

JAKE: Tell Heath goodnight, honey. And put that computer back in my office. I'll try to help see to it from now on you don't have to go there to find conversation.

She folds it up and leaves LS. He sighs, walks back to Daisy, and sits in a nearby chair.

ACT II

Scene Two

The Rankins' home, evening. Daisy sits in her rocking chair in the family room, pale and in a robe, holding the laptop computer. Her Bible sits open on a table next to her.

DAISY: Something is up. I know my son, and I don't think this latest e-mail from Shane

came from Camp Pendleton. Hmm. Oh well, I never expected him to spend his whole career at Camp Pendleton. *The doorbell rings.* Come in, Maggie!

Maggie Hightower, Holt's wife, walks in, carrying a covered dish.

MAGGIE: Why Daisy Rankin, what on earth are you doin' outa bed? You know that doctor said your chemo—

DAISY: Hush, Maggie. Thank you for bringin' that chicken—now put it in the kitchen and let's watch the President's address.

MAGGIE: Oh, the State o' the Union? Sure, honey. *She walks US for a moment and speaks from off stage.* You don't mind me stayin'? *She walks back into the room, without the dish.*

DAISY: Heavens no. They wouldn't let Candy Risinger take me down to West Dallas to minister to the kids this week or last, and I'm goin' stir crazy, even if I am only awake about half the time. Emily's got a playoff game up near the Red River—they've won fifteen straight games, Maggie—and who knows when our men'll get back from that elders' meetin'. Stay. Please stay.

MAGGIE: Oh Daisy, I have never in my life seen anyone transform a roomful o' little kids—and black ones no less—in a few seconds from wild, undisciplined banshees into spellbound angels hangin' on a person's every word like when you told 'em the story o' Jesus callin' Zaccheus down out o' that tree couple weeks ago at that West Dallas Baptist Bible Church.

DAISY: Aw, Maggie, don't.

MAGGIE: No, it's true— *Her voice chokes.* —actually though, it's *you's* the angel, darlin', and you couldn't be more if you were wearin' a white robe and a shiny halo. Those children love you like they love no one else.

DAISY: Okay, Maggie, turn on the TV.

MAGGIE, *grabbing the remote and turning it on*: Okay. Thank the Lord we finally have such a godly Christian man in the White House. Especially after that lecherous miscreant Clinton. I can't honestly say who I hate worse, him or that detestable shrew wife o' his.

DAISY, *chuckling*: Jake calls it the former president and her husband Bill.

MAGGIE, *laughing*: You know, Holt was in on some deals with George back even before he was gov'nor, plus some o' his friends, from Texas, are on the President's staff. Anyhow, if you promise not to tell, I'll share a secret with you, Daisy.

DAISY: Sure, Maggie, tell me.

MAGGIE: Well, Holt found out this week we're gonna be guests in the Lincoln Bedroom this summer!

DAISY: You mean the White House Lincoln Bedroom—in Washington?

MAGGIE: That's right, can you believe it!

DAISY: Why, that is so exciting, Maggie. Y'all are gonna be part of history now.

MAGGIE, *lowering her voice to a near-whisper and clasping one of Daisy's hands*: No, actually, sugar, I think Shane—an' Josh--might be part o' history.

DAISY: What?

MAGGIE, *with a knowing smile*: Let's just listen to the President.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: Almost three months ago, the United Nations Security Council gave Saddam Hussein his final chance to disarm. He has shown instead utter contempt for the United Nations, and for the opinion of the world. The United Nations concluded in 1999 that Saddam Hussein had biological weapons sufficient to produce over 25,000 liters of anthrax -- enough doses to kill several million people.

MAGGIE: That's what Holt said too, and some of the really big oil men down at the Cattleman's Club.

DAISY: I didn't know that.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: The United Nations concluded that Saddam Hussein had materials sufficient to produce more than 38,000 liters of botulinum toxin -- enough to subject millions of people to death by respiratory failure. Our intelligence officials estimate that Saddam Hussein had the materials to produce as much as five hundred tons of sarin mustard and VX nerve agent. In such quantities, these chemical agents could also kill untold thousands.

DAISY: Goodness, Iraq has all that? It sounds like they're the ones we ought to be fightin', even more than Afghanistan.

MAGGIE, *winking*: Or maybe in addition to.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: U.S. intelligence indicates that Saddam Hussein had upwards of thirty thousand munitions capable of delivering chemical agents. He has mobile biological weapons labs . . . germ warfare agents . . . an advanced nuclear weapons development program. Year after year, Saddam Hussein has gone to elaborate lengths, spent enormous sums, taken great risks to build and keep weapons of mass

destruction. But why? The only possible explanation, the only possible use he could have for those weapons, is to dominate, intimidate--or attack.

DAISY: Attack who?

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: And this Congress and the American people must recognize another threat. Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. Secretly, and without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own. Before September the 11th, many in the world believed that Saddam Hussein could be contained. But chemical agents, lethal viruses and shadowy terrorist networks are not easily contained. Imagine those nineteen hijackers with other weapons and other plans--this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.

DAISY: Lord.

MAGGIE: That's right, honey. That Hussein is a madman.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: Some have said we must not act until the threat is imminent. Since when have terrorists and tyrants announced their intentions, politely putting us on notice before they strike?

DAISY: Oh Lord, we are getting ready to do something, and it is going to have to do with my son.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: The dictator who is assembling the world's most dangerous weapons has already used them on whole villages . . . torturing children while their parents are made to watch . . . electric shock, burning with hot irons, dripping acid on the skin, mutilation with electric drills, cutting out tongues, and rape. If this is not evil, then evil has no meaning.

DAISY, *whispering to herself*: Here it comes.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: America will not accept a serious and mounting threat to our country, and our friends and our allies.

DAISY: Dear God, my boy has signed up for a war.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: Let there be no misunderstanding: If Saddam Hussein does not fully disarm, for the safety of our people and for the peace of the world, we will lead a coalition to disarm him. Tonight I have a message for the men and women who will keep the peace, members of the American Armed Forces. *Daisy struggles forward in her wheelchair for the President's next words.* Many of you are assembling in or near

the Middle East, and some crucial hours may lay ahead. In those hours, the success of our cause will depend on you.

DAISY: Jesus in heaven.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: This nation fights reluctantly, because we know the cost and we dread the days of mourning that always come.

DAISY: Oh my, I wonder where Shane is at this very moment?

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity. We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know—we do not claim to know—all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history.

Daisy looks down, then reaches and grabs her Bible and clutches it to her breast.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage*: May He guide us now. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.

Maggie begins to weep softly.

DAISY, *wheeling to her and embracing her*: Why, Maggie.

MAGGIE: I-I'm just so thankful that God in His mercy's finally given us a man—an' a Texan too—that fears and reverences Him, and seeks to uphold His honor. I jist can hardly believe, little as we deserve it, that He's given us such a man to lead us through these dark hours. It's like Winston Churchill and the British in World War II, and George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Someone we can trust your Shane and my Josh to. God's always given us what we need, even when we didn't deserve it.

ACT II

Scene Three

Rankin home, evening. Daisy sits propped up in the recliner, writing in her diary, her Bible on one side of her, the laptop computer on the other. Medicine vials cover the table next to her.

DAISY, *speaking aloud what she writes*: I just don't understand why a good trustworthy conservative columnist who was high up in the Reagan Administration, would say such things. Questioning how—and why—we got into past wars, even World Wars I and II—even the Gulf War only a decade ago. Writing how we've committed far-from-Christian acts once we enter our fights. Even that "Highway of Death"—wasn't that the battle where Holt Hightower did so well and got those medals? I always heard that

was a heroic battle that clinched victory in the war. That's far from the picture this guy presented of it. How depressing, I'm glad I quit reading it, even though I loved his previous articles and always trusted him before. It just doesn't make sense. I think I've been spending too much time on that Internet since I got sick. *She stops writing for a moment and ponders.* And that part where he warned us to beware of an American President's claims when he is actually wanting to get into a war with a particular country, how the face of that country's leader will usually start popping up on major news magazine covers as well, accompanied by such complimentary descriptives as, "The Face of Evil," or "The New Hitler." *She takes some pills from a vial and washes them down with water.* And that Paul Wolfowitz, the President's man who said we need to employ whatever measures are necessary to remove Saddam Hussein and his regime from power in Iraq. I like what he said, though, about how the last twelve years against Iraq cost us only "slightly over thirty billion dollars," and how even if it came to a fight with Iraq, no way would the Bush Administration lead America into anything remotely resembling another quagmire like Vietnam, or spending another \$30 billion to be there for another twelve years.

She closes her diary, struggles to her feet, walks to an inconspicuous drawer, slides it open, places her diary in it, closes the drawer, then locks it with a key. She creeps back to the recliner, lays down, pulls a throw blanket over herself, grabs the television remote control, and turns on the TV.

DAISY: How can two conservative Republicans hold such contrasting views on such a staggering prospect as a shooting war in the Middle East? I am so tired. *She turns off the light and pulls the covers over her.* I am so tired all the time now. *She looks at the television, her eyes growing heavy.* Vice President Cheney...talking about...Saddam.

DICK CHENEY, *off-stage, sounding from the TV:* --regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.

DAISY, *drifting to sleep:* Wonder...where...Shane...

ACT II

Scene Four

Rankin home, quiet and empty. Emily comes in the front door, looks around.

EMILY: Hello Rankin family? Anyone here? *She crosses the living room, lays down her book bag, and plops down in the recliner.* Course not. Dad's at church. Mom's at the hospital. Shane's in Iraq. Yeah, family—right. *She shakes her head, leans up, then speaks as though someone is with her.* Two losses the whole season, and both of those the refs shafted us, got Kylie and me both out of the game early on cheap fouls. *She grimaces, then falls back into the recliner.* Then we roll to the state tournament semifinals, beating the stuffing out of everyone in sight, and Kylie gets—oh! I can barely speak the words. *Whoop-ing cough! Whooping cough?* That sorry piece of trash! So we lose by two to that Houston team that wins the state championship by 15 points. Oh I

can't stand to think about it. Thank the Lord I've got two more years—if *Kylie*— *Her voice drips with venom at the word.* —recovers from her freaking *whoop*-ing cough. Why can't we have someone else good and her not even on our team? *She rolls over onto her side, facing us, and plops her head onto the palm of one of her hands.* Now Mom's sick—real sick. And Shane is who-knows-where.

EMILY, *in Beano voice*: Beano thinks it sucks to be Emily.

EMILY, *in higher-pitched Beano's Baby voice*: Hey, it sucks to be Beano's Baby too.

EMILY, *in Beano voice*: Hush, Beano's Baby!

EMILY, *in Beano's Baby voice*: No—I miss Mom. When is she coming home?

EMILY, *in Beano voice, serious, after a pause*: I don't know, Baby, I don't know.

ACT II

Scene Five

Daisy's hospital bed, on the lowered forestage, the main stage darkened. She looks worse than before, and is surrounded by machines and tubes. Jake steps into the room, wearing his cowboy hat, which he takes off.

JAKE: How's my darlin'?

DAISY: I got more tubes snakin' in and out of me than a porcupine has needles; but other'n that, I'm blessed. *They stare at one another, and clasp hands. She smiles wanly.* I was just remembering--or maybe I was dreaming, I can't hardly tell the difference any more—oh, did you see Maggie and Sharmonique? They just left.

JAKE: No, must've just missed them. Maggie told me the other day all the kids there in West Dallas where you go want you to be their mentor, whole flock of 'em, girls, boys, even some of their moms, even a couple their grandmas.

DAISY, *embarrassed, shrugging it off*: Oh. Well, I was just rememberin', or dreamin', how we used to watch Shane and Em out the back window, playin' in the west pasture, out by that big old Live Oak, with the dogs runnin' to and fro barkin', and especially in spring, with the sweet scent o' the bluebonnets driftin' in through the window, and the white dogwood blossoms flutterin' through the air all about 'em when the wind'd pick up.

JAKE, *sitting down on the bed beside her*: I was rememberin' the same thing myself last—night.

DAISY, *sternly*: Now Jake Rankin, I told you not to--

JAKE: --Is—the--morphine helpin' any?

DAISY: Not so much it'll derail me from what I need to accomplish in the next week.

JAKE: Or two.

They are quiet. He looks down.

DAISY: The Lord will take care of you and Emily—and Shane too, hubby.

JAKE: I—I don't know how I'll stand even to be in that house. *Choking up.* How will we ever be a family again?

She cradles his head against her as he stifles sobs.

DAISY: For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. *She strokes his hair.* We have always known it would not be forever. But we shall have forever, my darling, and no matter how wonderful this is, there it will be ever so much better.

JAKE, *looking up, tears streaking his face:* How fortunate and blessed I am, to have so great a woman.

DAISY: Take care of our little girl. It will be hardest on her. *He nods.* You hear? No matter what it takes. You put her before that church. *He starts to nod again, but something across the room catches her eye.* Turn up the volume, dear. Looks like the President's sayin' somethin' important on TV. *Jake turns up the volume.*

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off-stage:* American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger.

DAISY, *watching the TV:* Have we attacked them?

GEORGE W. BUSH *off-stage:* We have no ambition in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people.

DAISY: Dear God in heaven. He did it. He surely did it.

GEORGE W. BUSH *off-stage:* This will not be a campaign of half-measures, and we will accept no outcome except victory. We will pass through this time of peril and carry on the work of peace. We will defend our freedom. We will bring freedom to others. And we will prevail. May God bless our country and all who defend her.

DAISY, *looking at Jake, breathing hard*: I'm gonna leave you with a charge that'll force you to play the man, Jake Rankin. You pastor our flock. You weep with 'em when they weep, and you rejoice with 'em when they rejoice. You'll have to decide if you think what we do in Iraq is right. But whether it is or isn't, if you think somethin' needs to be said that a shepherd should say, for the good o' our people, you better say it.

JAKE, *startled*: Why sure, sweetie, I'm already—

DAISY: --I'm not talkin' about already. There's a lotta folks been doin' a lotta things already for a long time. I'm sayin' you stick close to God and you be *His* man, whatever folks say. *Her lips tremble*. Our daughter'll need for you to. And—I think our son will too. *He stares at her*. Let's pray for our boy right now.

JAKE: Right. *He clasps her bent, tubed hand, bowing his head as they both close their eyes*. God in heaven, we come to You in—in a difficult hour . . .

The stage lights go down, then out.

ACT III

Scene One

The church, but we know that only from the words spoken by the voices, for the stage remains dark.

KYLIE, *off stage*: Sorry about your mom, Emily.

EMILY, *off stage*: Thanks, Kylie.

HOLT, *off stage*: Jake, buddy, you know the Governor.

JAKE, *off stage, his voice friendly but solemn*: Glad you made it, brother. Know you're busy.

GOVERNOR, *off stage*: It's my honor, Pastor. She musta been some lady. Bet she called my wife two hundred times to get her to come and speak to the Highland Park folks about gettin' involved with those kids in West Dallas.

JAKE, *off stage*: Thank you, sir. Excuse me, sir. I got to get ready.

The great old American hymn "There is a Fountain" rises from the piano, horns, and stringed instruments.

GOVERNOR, *off stage*: Look at this place, Holt, it's jammed full.

HOLT, *off stage*: Our new worship center holds over a thousand people, sir.

GOVERNOR, *off stage*: And folks outside too—in the lobby, out in the parkin’ lot.

HOLT, *off stage*: She—she had somethin’ special, buddy. *Pause*. Think she had—vision.

TOMMY, *off stage*: Emily, isn’t that that little Sharmonique girl your mom helped, over there with all those West Dallas kids?

EMILY, *off stage*: Leave me alone, Tommy.

TOMMY, *off stage*: Let’s give Emily some space and sit over here, Rog. She’s really hurtin’.

ROG, *off stage*: So great a woman she must have been, Tommy—such is the way queens are buried.

ACT III

Scene Two

The Rankins’ home again, but we cannot at first see that, because the stage remains dark and now grows silent. From out of the dark comes Emily’s somber voice.

EMILY: I found Mom’s diary a few days after she died. It was where it always was—in a locked drawer of her dresser. But for some reason, the drawer wasn’t locked this time. I only saw the diary once, a couple years before, and I only saw the outside of it then. *The stage lights slowly come up. I felt as though I was holding something sacred. Now visible sitting at the dining room table, she stares at the worn cover, in a mixture of solemnity and awakening awe.* Worn, but sturdy, just like Mom. Where did all those folks come from at Mom’s funeral? I never saw the likes of it. I only knew a fraction of ‘em. Course, the whole church was there, and almost the whole school, too. *She climbs to her feet and walks toward the forestage, her countenance darkening.* Pastor Sims brought Sharmonay or Harmonica or whatever her pathetic little name is and two busloads of other children and parents up from West Dallas. He gave a eulogy, too. It was Daddy stole the show, though. Not that he meant to—in fact he didn’t really, the whole event was about Mom. The whole—celebration. That’s what they kept callin’ it—a celebration. A celebration of Mom’s life, that God gave her to us for so long, and that He worked through her in so many lives. *She turns and returns to sit at the table., her voice quieting.* But—I needed her longer. *She holds the diary to her chest and leans over it.* You kept her from me a lot while she was here, God, then You took her from me for good too soon—way too soon. *She looks up, her face twisted in repulsion.* I hate You for it! You’re either too weak to do anything about it, and everything I ever been taught is a lie. The alternative is even worse—You *could* do somethin’, but You won’t. So I lose and You suck either way, “God.” You’re either not all-powerful or you’re not all-good. *She sits quietly for a moment.* I think you’re both. You’re weak and you suck. Now I’m all alone—unless I count horrid You. *Her head droops to her chest and she mumbles, beaten.* Celebration—right. *Then slowly her head rises a bit and she opens the*

book. She begins to read, then gasps. Why, the very first entry is the night Grandpa Clanton died. Mom's daddy. Christmas Eve 1974. Mom was only nineteen—three years older'n me. *Tears fill her eyes as she reads, turning the pages.* Page after page she wrote, with remembrances of him, what he did for and with her . . . what he was.

DAISY, *off stage*: How grateful I am to You, O Lord, for givin' me such a man for my father.

EMILY, *a bit perplexed*: I know Grandpa wasn't perfect, it was Mama herself who told me. He never, his whole life, shook his battle with depression, he fought till the day he died to keep his language clean when he was mad, and his—drinkin'—nearly cost him both his life and his marriage when he was younger. *She looks up, reasoning through it all.* Yet somehow, God worked through all of it and turned a willful, prideful man into—"Grandpa"—*She looks back to the diary.* —the object of this long-ago monument o' love I am now readin' from my mother's own hand. *She turns more pages, scanning them.* Hmm. Whereas my own thoughts and concerns are all about—me—Mom's were focused on Grandpa when *he* died. I guess that's one o' the main differences between us—and one o' the many differences. Goodness, she wrote thirty pages just that night, from 10:22 p.m. Christmas Eve to 1:16 a.m. Christmas mornin', all to God, and all about Grandpa. *Beat.* The last paragraph is about one of her heroes—Mary Lee, the wife of Robert E. Lee and the great-granddaughter of Martha Washington.

DAISY, *off stage*: "God knows the best time for us to leave this world," Mary Lee wrote, the day her husband of nearly forty years, and with whom she had had seven children, died, "and we must never question either His love or wisdom. This is my comfort in my great sorrow, to know that had my husband lived a thousand years, he could not have died more honored and lamented even had he accomplished all we desired and hoped."

Emily stares at the diary, then pulls it to her chest, curls up on her bed clutching it, and turns out the light.

ACT III

Scene Three

The Rankins' home again, Emily stalks in LS from outside, wearing her basketball shorts, t-shirt, and sneakers

EMILY: Goodness, what is wrong with those people, standin' around in the Texas summer heat at noonday and wavin' signs against our country and President and war, pretendin' to be Christians. "Who would Jesus bomb?" indeed! What do they know about Jesus? Sorry atheist liberals. *She plops down at the dining room table and gets on her laptop computer.* Let's see what the real story is from a real Christian, my big brother. *She begins typing. After a moment, she sees Shane's image appear on the screen, then his voice sounds.*

SHANE, *off stage*: Hey, goofy.

EMILY: You're the goofball.

SHANE, *off stage*: Goofy—

EMILY: Goofus—

SHANE, *off stage*: Doofus—

EMILY: Dorky doofus. *She is interrupted by loud laughter behind Shane.* Is that Rodriguez or Jasper?

SHANE, *off stage*: Uh, Jasper. The Rev's tryin' to talk Falster into gettin' baptized again and the cracker won't have nothin' to do with it.

EMILY: But I thought you said Falster—the guy from Alabama, right?—

SHANE, *off stage*: --Yeah, that's him—

EMILY: --I thought you said he's already a believer.

SHANE, *off stage*: Well, that's a topic o' endless— *He apparently turns away from the camera, and laughter erupts again* —speculation. Man's been baptized least half a dozen times and walked more aisles 'n that and still dudn't know if he's saved—especially when the sh—uh, the rounds start flyin'.

EMILY: Goodness.

SHANE, *off stage*: So what's up at home?

EMILY: Nothin' new, really.

SHANE, *off stage*: How's your buddy Kylie?

EMILY: Shutup, doofus!

SHANE, *off stage*: Hey now, show some respect for a man whose fightin' fer your freedom!

EMILY: Gee thanks, it really feels free around here—freer'n ever before, cuz I'm usually the only one here.

SHANE, *off stage*: Hey, my little sis sounds a little down.

EMILY: No, not really.

SHANE, *off stage, mimicking her*: No, not real-ly.

EMILY: Oh shut up.

SHANE, *off stage*: Guess it's a lot different without mom there.

EMILY: You can say that again.

SHANE, *off stage*: Guess it's a lot different without mom there.

EMILY: You know, as much of a—witch—as Kylie Hightower is, she was right, you really are a total re-tard.

SHANE, *off stage*: Hey, don't complain. Remember, I didn't even get to come home for the funeral. Or see her the last three months of her life.

EMILY: Yeah, the Marines sure shafted you on that one.

SHANE, *off stage*: Well—

EMILY: And today, I saw a group o' people pro-testin'.

SHANE, *off stage*: Protestin'? The war? In Texas?

EMILY: Yeah, by the County Courthouse on the Town Square in Denton.

SHANE, *off stage, bewildered*: Well, what were they doin'?

EMILY: Just standin' around mostly, some of 'em with signs. I just saw 'em for a few seconds as I drove by after droppin' off my lizard boots to get resoled.

SHANE, *off stage*: Bunch o' spoiled college kids, like in Vietnam? *She says nothing.* Well was it?

EMILY, *uncomfortable*: Just different people, some older folks, some young people, a couple o' kids. I saw Pastor Shahan an' a couple o' people there from that conservative Presbyterian church?

SHANE, *off stage*: What! Pastor Shahan, Dad's friend?

EMILY: Yeah. Let's just forget about it, Shane.

SHANE, *off stage*: Dang. I didn't know he was against the war.

EMILY: I didn't know any Christians were against the war. *She is a bit shaken.* I thought only liberals were.

SHANE, *off stage*: Well, what did their signs say?

EMILY: Stupid things, totally stupid, Shane.

SHANE, *off stage*: Like what?

EMILY, *sounding contemptuous, mocking them*: Like, “Support the Troops—Bring Them Home” and “Who Would Jesus Bomb?” How stupid is that?

SHANE, *off stage*: Pretty stupid.

EMILY: But people were mad at them.

SHANE, *off stage*: What do you mean?

EMILY: Well a few people were makin’—I mean lots o’ people, Shane, lots—were makin’ cross faces at ‘em and some gave ‘em the thumbs down and some even yelled at ‘em.

SHANE, *off stage*: All that happened in the few seconds it took you to drive past ‘em? I never knew the Denton Town Square to be that crowded on a Saturday afternoon.

EMILY: Well—yeah, it did. One guy yelled, “Freedom ain’t free, jackasses!”

SHANE, *off stage*: Oh yeah? What’d you do?

EMILY: I honked my horn, in support o’ the guy that yelled it, then I gave the protestors the thumbs down sign.

SHANE, *off stage*: Ha ha, and they say Kylie Hightower’s mean.

EMILY: Then—

SHANE, *off stage*: What?

EMILY: Oh nothin’.

SHANE, *off stage*: No, what?

EMILY: Nothin’!

SHANE, *off stage*: Tell me or I won’t let you webcast with me any more.

EMILY: Promise? *Beat*. Okay, the guy who said that about freedom, then he told the protestors, “Why don’t you move to Iraq and see if they let you stand on the street corner

and protest there?” Then he said, “Hell”—he said hell, not me—“Hell, they oughta kill all the Muslims *and* the Christians!”

SHANE, *off stage*: Whoa.

EMILY: And his wife was with him.

SHANE, *off stage*: Did you honk again?

EMILY: No I almost ran into a police officer who was ridin’ a bicycle.

SHANE, *off stage, after a pause*: You *are* a dork.

EMILY, *making the accompanying sign with her thumb and forefinger, and speaking in Beano voice*: You’re a total lo-ser.

SHANE, *off stage*: That’s what your friend Kylie thinks.

EMILY: She’s not my friend!

SHANE, *off stage*: She’s your basketball buddy, y’all are like sisters.

EMILY: Shane Rankin, I can’t stand that—that—

SHANE, *off stage, something distracting him, laughing*: Oops, gotta move out.

EMILY: Oh! You make me so mad, Shane!

SHANE, *off stage, loudly smacking the web camera with a ridiculous kiss*: Love ya lots. *Emily just stares at him.* I love ya, Em.

EMILY: I love you too, Shane.

SHANE, *off stage*: Love you.

EMILY: Love you more.

SHANE, *off stage*: Love you times ten.

EMILY: Love you times a hundred.

SHANE, *off screen*: Love you times a million.

EMILY: --A trillion. In—

SHANE, *off screen*: --fin—

EMILY: --ity! I said it first!

SHANE, *off screen*: No I did!

EMILY: Oh you're such a liar! You cheated just like you always did!

SHANE, *off screen*: Love you sis.

EMILY, *puffs out a sigh*: Love you too. *Pause*. Be careful.

SHANE, *off screen*: Bye. *A burst of jocular male laughter sounds behind him just before the screen goes black.*

Emily signs off the computer and flips on the radio. The pulsating sounds of Toby Keith's macho American anthem "Courtesy of the Red White and Blue" fills the room.

TOBY KEITH, *off stage, singing*: This big dog will fight when you rattle his cage,
You'll be sorry that you messed with the US of A, Cuz we'll put a boot in your ass,
It's the American way.

Her step takes on a spring as she walks to a concealed place in the room.

TOBY KEITH, *off stage, singing*: Hey Uncle Sam put your name at the top of
his list, And the statue of liberty started shaking her fists, And the eagle will fly
And its gonna be hell

She reaches in and pulls out Daisy's diary, then struts to her bed, puffing up with the energy and muscular message of the music.

TOBY KEITH, *off stage, singing*: When you hear mother freedom start ringing her bell,
And it will feel like the whole wide world is raining down on you.

A fierce expression on her face, she raises one arm, clenches her fist and swings down as if striking a blow, all in cadence to the song.

EMILY: Yes! We're gonna kick some— *A feeling of semi-guilt lowers her voice to a loud whisper and she looks around, as though someone might hear her. Then she erupts with a resounding one-word shout—* ass!

Still in rhythm, she springs high off the floor and onto the couch, chest-first, like onto a trampoline. She opens the diary to where she has bookmarked it and begins again to read.

TOBY KEITH, *off stage, singing*: Brought to you courtesy of the red, white and blue
Of the red White and blue, Of my red white and blue.

EMILY, *with exaggerated drama*: Of my red white and blue.

ACT III

Scene Four

The Rankins' home again, late at night. Jake comes in, agitated. He grabs a Dr. Pepper and plops into the recliner. He picks up a sports magazine, opens it, reads for a few seconds, then tosses it back down, shaking his head.

JAKE, *aloud to a picture of Daisy hanging on the wall*: Of all people to be against the war, honey—against our godly President—my own best friend and fellow pastor, Sam Shahan! I can't believe it! *He stands up and paces, waving the bottle like a sword.* Why, he actually went to an anti-war protest—actually took part in it—waved a sign, for cryin' out loud—like, like some '60s hippie pinko-fag! *He paces faster.* I know Sam's struggled with his drinkin' same way I've struggled with, since you've been gone—well, you know, honey—the wrong sorta images that can wind up on a computer screen. But surely too much whiskey can't affect a reasonable, intelligent, godly man's brain so much he would think our own actions contributed to 9/11! *He downs the bottle, stalks US into another room, presumably the kitchen, returns with another Dr. Pepper, and begins to drink it as he paces more.* And to suggest havin' our armies on so-called “holy ground” in the Middle East, are awl pumpin' outa there—and protectin' God's chosen people, Israel—is why Osama Bin Laden come after us! An' that Iraq didn't have chemical weapons an' weapons o' mass destruction an' a nuke-u-lure bomb program and wadn't a threat to us! And--*He takes a long slug from the bottle*—to suggest that Saddam Hussein had nothin' to do with 9/11! You'd think he blamed *us* for 9/11—poor Sam! Good grief, those Presbyterians and their liquor. No wonder they can't grow their churches any, their pastors' brains're all pickled. Whole world is goin' crazy. *He flips on a nearby radio.* I need some Sean Hannity or Seamus Houlihan or somebody to gimme back some hope.

HOULIHAN, *youthful-sounding but strident, from the radio, off-stage*: I guess I should have known that the liberals would mess up the carpet even on this one, the most important and yet simplest issue of our generation, and likely of our century. It's bad enough that these weasels cry out ceaselessly against every tradition of decency and virtue known to God or man, be it the slaughter of defenseless unborn children or the forcing on our society of sick, deranged lifestyles, or the use of your tax dollars and mine for every cockeyed social engineering scheme the mind of man—or lesbian woman—can concoct.

JAKE, *waving his bottle, his spirits lifted*: Preach it, Seamus! *He turns to Daisy's picture and motions toward the radio.* Ain't he a humdinger, darlin'?

HOULIHAN, *on radio, off-stage*: But they have outdone even themselves this time. To have the audacity, the disrespect for our flag, our Constitution, and especially for the blood of the men and women who have fought—who fight at this very moment in Iraq and Afghanistan—to defend both, by suggesting that this President is not one of the

greatest we have ever had, and this cause perhaps the most glorious, and certainly the most important—well those liberals who utter such obscenities are not worthy of the great country that sired them—the greatest country, I might remind you, in the history of the world, and the last true hope of the world. *Jake nods and winks at Daisy's picture.* It's time for a break, but when we return, we'll talk to Jim in Mobile, Hank in Fort Worth, and Wendy in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan—you've been on hold too long as I've rambled on, and you're great Patriots all.

JAKE, turning off the radio, relaxing into his recliner, and looking again toward Daisy's photograph: Honey, what's so great about Seamus Houlihan is, he puts into words what ordinary folk like you an' me think, but can never quite find the way to say. So many times I just about concluded I'm crazy—I've almost gone, uh—soft—only to flip on Seamus and get reminded it's those liberal clowns out there who're the crazy ones. As Seamus would say, the deluded—the dangerous—yes, the enemy, because they oppose what God and His Word stand for. *He sits quietly for a minute, sipping at his Dr. Pepper.* Then, as if a revelation slowly dawns on him, he continues. Dang, sweetie, for a minute there, Sam actually had me questionin' the President, and if our actions were right about Iraq. You know I've always respected Sam and his thinkin'—aside from his occasional Calvinistic misinterpretations o' the Bible, course. But everyone's entitled to be wrong on a few things. *He stands, walks to Daisy's picture, straightens it, just slightly, then stares at her image.* Once again, though, baby, ole Seamus is the human truth detector. He says it with passion, but logic and common sense too. He sheds the light on falsehoods that might otherwise seem true. He's a master at doin' that. *Jake stares at his wife's visage for a moment in silence.* It's amazin' a Catholic could have such wisdom. I guess it's true some Catholics *are* Christians. Holt's never thought so, but even he says Seamus might be the exception to the rule. Like he said, even a broken clock is right twice a day. *His gaze drifts away from the picture and he sips at his bottle.* You know, it makes me think all Sam's problems're somehow related to his wrong views on baptism. After all, if a man's wrong 'bout baptism, he's wrong about salvation, and if he's wrong about salvation, he's wrong about it all. *He looks back at Daisy's picture.* You reckon maybe I pay too much attention to Sam's views, sweetie? *Pause.* *When he speaks, his voice is strained.* Gosh I miss ya, darlin'. *He looks at his watch, and lurches toward the door.* Good grief, I better git ready for the Finance Committee meetin'. This stuff's sure a sight more interestin', though. Least I got the Christians fer Israel meetin' comin' up this weekend to look forward to.

ACT III

Scene Five

The Rankin house. Emily sits at the dining table again with Daisy's diary.

EMILY, aiming her words generally toward the ceiling: I still feel sorta guilty readin' your diary, even after quite a few days of it, but not as much, 'cause I think it's helpin' me. Plus, I promise, Mom, it's like--I *sense* before I get to 'em, the really private parts about you or Daddy, that I shouldn't read. An' I promise I don't, Mom. I hope you believe me. *She tenses up, looks down, and catches her breath.* Sometimes, though, I

just burst into tears at the sheer-- *Her throat grows tight.* --overwhelmin'—pain—of—
you—bein'—gone. *She breathes deeply a couple of times, then relaxes.* Oh God! It's
strange how in those times, the only thing works is callin' out to Him and just sittin' there
and takin' it, while the pain washes over me like a tidal wave. Then it's like somethin'
mingles in with it—sometimes when the wave is still rollin'—it mixes in an' starts to
dilute it. I think it's the grace o' God, Mom. *Beat.* I'm startin' to feel, I don't know,
sometimes I feel comforted and safe, just like you were still here watchin' over me and
guidin' me along. *She gets up from the chair, still holding the diary, walks to the couch,
plops down on her stomach, lays the book on the floor next to the couch, then leans over
to look at the opened book.* I guess, in a way, you are, Mom? Mama? *She turns onto
her back, leaving the book on the floor, props herself up with her elbows, and kicks her
legs up in the air like in a bicycling motion, her voice growing excited.* It's excitin' in
another way, too. Since your diary has your ideas an' thoughts I never heard you say, it
makes it seem more like you're still around, an' I was learnin' from livin' life with
someone still alive, rather'n just relivin' the same old stories of someone who's gone.
*She shakes her head and speaks with great conviction, her legs coming back down to the
couch.* But I can't look at pictures of you—leastways, not yet. I tried once. I stared an'
kept starin' into your eyes. Gosh how embarrassin'. *She turns back onto her stomach,
cupping her hands under her chin and looking across the room, her body stretched
across the couch.* When Daddy got home I was screamin' so, he nearly had to call 911 to
get medical attention for me. So I'll wait till later to look at the pit-chers. And somethin'
else, Mom. This part is really—confusin'. *She reaches down for the book and searches
through it.* I didn't notice it at first, and I don't think you did, either. It didn't happen till
the last part of your diary. The first time I saw it was...right—*She puts her finger on a
passage—here.*

DAISY, *offstage*: I hope the President's as cautious and circumspect in his dealin's with
Iraq as he would be if his own beautiful twin daughters were among the soldiers who
would enforce his policies.

EMILY: Oh and then—

DAISY, *offstage*: Can these accounts I read on Internet news sites, from many different
sources, conservative and liberal, concernin' our apparently inhuman and certainly
unchristian embargo against Iraq the last dozen years—which harmed its people more
grievously in almost direction proportion to their level of poverty and want—can they be
true? *Emily looks away, troubled.* A quarter of a million children alone, dead—'cause of
our embargo?

Emily jumps up, grabs a basketball, and starts dribbling.

EMILY, *troubled*: It just doesn't make sense. Not us. Mom—you, you must have-- *She
dribbles faster, then hears knocking at the front door.* Who can that be? I'm not
expectin' anyone. *She walks to the door, opens it, and sees Amy, Tommy, his sister Mary
Ann, and Rog.*

AMY: Happy birthday, Em!

They rush past, Tommy carrying a big cake.

EMILY: How'd you remember?

AMY: Remember? May Day, right, girl? Outa the way, let us in, we got gifts.

MARY ANN: Several of the other basketball girls are on their way, Em.

EMILY, *with sarcasm*: Oh, that's where Kylie is. *Amy gives her a wry look.* Or maybe her invitation got lost in the mail?

Jake comes in the door.

EMILY, *surprised*: Hey, Dad. You're—here.

JAKE: I sure am. He brandishes the package. And I think you're gonna like what's in here.

EMILY, *with meaning*: Thanks, Dad.

Jake's cell phone sounds. He walks away from the group and answers it.

JAKE: Hey. *Pause.* What? *Pause.* You sure? That's great! *Pause.* Right now? Okay, we'll turn it on. *Excited, he closes the phone and turns back to the group.* Hey y'all, turn on the TV.

EMILY: What is it, Dad?

JAKE: That was Mr. Hightower and he says the President just announced the war's over! It's on TV right now.

The group explodes in a whoop of joy and Tommy turns on the TV. The familiar voice of President Bush sounds.

GEORGE W. BUSH, *off stage*: Thank you all very much. Admiral Kelly, Captain Card, officers and sailors of the USS Abraham Lincoln, my fellow Americans. Major combat operations in Iraq have ended in the battle of Iraq. The United States and our allies have prevailed. *Applause sounds from his audience.* And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country.

JAKE: Mr. Hightower said it took us six weeks an' one day to win. He said the towelheads—er, Hussein an' his army— *The rest of the group cheers and chortles with laughter at this sequence* —folded up like a pup tent after a scout night out. *The group cheers again.*

Emily's cheering turns to laughter and giddiness, then, when Amy hugs her, to racking sobs of relief.

AMY: He's gonna be okay, Em, they're all gonna be okay. We won, it's over, and he's such a hero! Lord, I want him to marry me!

The group roars with laughter, and even Emily and her tear-streaked face join in. Jake comes to her, takes her in his arms, and they hug.

AMY: Let's cut the cake an' open some presents!

JAKE: Here, I'll slice the cake, y'all get some plates an' drinks an' stuff.

Emily walks to a tissue box in the corner of the room and dabs at her eyes and face. Tommy follows her.

EMILY: Hey Tommy, thanks for comin'. I know you're busy, what with—well, you know, havin' to help your mom with all your little brothers an' sisters since, uh—

TOMMY: Since my dad left for his secretary? Aw, that's okay, I know everyone knows. I'm used to it by now, least pretty used to it. He hadn't been around that much for quite awhile, since even before your dad 'n them kicked him out as elder at the church.

EMILY: Oh, Tommy, I am so sorry.

TOMMY: Aw, that's okay. I— *He looks down at his feet and stammers* —I—I just wanted you to know how happy I am about Shane, an' that I been prayin' for him ever' day since he left. Uh—an' for you, Emily.

EMILY: Why thank you, Tommy, that's very sweet o' you to say that. *He nods and turns to walk away.* Tommy? I just want to say—you're a very sweet boy, an' I'm glad to be your friend.

Tommy's eyes light up as he blushes and a goobery sort of grin crinkles his face. He almost knocks something over as he shuffles back to the group. Emily starts to walk past the group toward the front door.

JAKE: Hey Em, where you goin'? Didju know how determined Rog here is to get into college? He's got a million hurdles to clear, not least that he's still learnin' English, even though he's a couple years older than the rest of y'all. He dudn't even know how he's gonna to pay for it. *He places a gentle hand on Rog's shoulder.* But I told him we got thousands o' dollars stored up in our educational scholarship fund at church now, plus I know our people'll step up with whatever else is needed for 'im.

Rog looks down sheepishly.

EMILY: Sure, Rog, we'll all help ya get there. Hey I'm goin' outside for just a minute. I'll be right back.

AMY, *kidding her*: You better be right back or I'm gonna eat your cake and steal your presents too, dawg!

EMILY, *kidding her back*: You're the dawg, homey.

AMY: Huh-uh, you are, homes.

EMILY: Face.

AMY: Face.

EMILY, *laughing as she steps onto the forestage, which represents her front yard*: Face-face. *She inhales deeply and looks up at the sky*. Least you can still see some stars out here on a clear night, even with all the new homes they're buildin' in ever' direction. Good grief, like you said, Mom, this place is gonna look like downtown Dallas before it's all over. Oh Mom, I know you're up there somewhere, wherever heaven is. I'm just glad maybe you were wrong about all this war stuff. Uh—meanin' no disrespect, of course. It's just that it does all seem to be workin' out. And Mom—doesn't that mean Shane'll get to come home for good soon? *She stares silently upward for a moment*. I do remember you yourself writin' at one point how you were surprised at your own changin' views. *Pause*. Mom? Maybe—I wonder if it was the medication an' illness an' what-all was to blame for it, like Dad says. Anyhow, thank you, Lord. I love you God. And I love you Mom.

ACT III

Scene Six

The church, people talking and drifting out following a worship service.

HOLT: Hot dog, Jakester, you got this thing blowin' and goin', bud. Biggest attendance today since before Jimmy our youth minister got arrested two years ago. *He notices Emily, Amy, Tommy, Mary Ann, Rog, and Kylie gathered in the room US*. And lookee there. You ever seen more kids in one church fired up about goin' on a mission trip—to the Amazon River basin! Over fifty of 'em—taken their Christmas vacation to go! *He notices Jake's solemn expression*. What's the matter, Pard?

JAKE, *after a pause*: I don't know, Holt, it just makes me realize how much we aren't lookin' past ourselves an' our own lives. We oughta be goin' to South America, but we oughta find somewhere closer to home to, shouldn't we? A lot closer. Shoot, I can't even find a neighborhood within ten miles o' this church where the houses aren't like palaces. I know the people need help there too, but we can't get past their iron gates and burglar alarms even to see them.

HOLT, *bewildered*: Well maybe we should get the move on with the bus ministry to the Mexican kids in that apartment complex—

JAKE: Yeah, maybe we should, Holt. Our kids'd be a sight, wouldn't they, drivin' the ten miles over there an' pullin' in with their Hummers and Beemers? All three of 'em that signed up as bein' interested in the Hispanic ministry.

HOLT: Dang bubba, what's got you riled up after such a great service?

JAKE: Aw, just—you know, sometimes since Daisy—I just—

HOLT, *nodding*: Oh, yeah, I understand. But listen, how proud do you think she'da been to hear your sermon today, not just about the mission trip an' Emily goin', but about how our boys are like missionaries 24/7? *He grows emotional*. Takin' earthly freedom and spiritual both to people been gittin' stepped on they whole lives. *He chokes up*. Man, that was a stroke o' genius, Jakie! You come up with that on ye own?

JAKE: Well—

HOLT, *pulling his vibrating cell phone out of a coat pocket*: 'scuse me jist a second, buddy. *He walks US and speaks into the phone*. What? *Beat*. When? *Beat*. You're kiddin' me. *Beat*. What kinda freak thing—I know, it's over, an' we won. *Beat*. Yeah. Alright, thanks. *He closes the phone and walks back DS to Jake*.

JAKE: What is it?

HOLT: Craziest thing ever heard, Jake. That was Josh. He said someone blew up the United Nations buildin' in Baghdad. Dozens killed an' wounded, includin' that sharp Brazilian fella they sent to head up the transition. Drove a truck bomb right up to his window an' blew it. *He shakes his head slowly, stunned*. It's—dang, Jake—it's over, what's the point o' somethin' like 'at'? *His face and his voice darken*. Dirty Islamic scum.

EMILY, *walking US to them with Amy and Mary Ann*: Let's go, Dad. Time to pick up Shane.

JAKE, *patting Holt on the shoulder*: It'll be alright, buddy. We won.

HOLT, *looking at him, still shaken*: Yeah, yeah we did.

JAKE: See ya at the airport?

HOLT: Yeah, sure, Jake, be right behind ya. *As Jake, Emily, and Amy walk away LS, he mumbles*, Moslem scum.

ACT IV

Scene One

Rankin home, night. Jake and Emily sit at the dining table but say nothing. Emily is angry.

JAKE: I—I don't have an explanation for it, honey. I was surprised as everyone else.

EMILY: You were surprised that Shane used the f-word in front of half the church at the airport when he saw his old buddy Josh Hightower? Gee, I wonder why? I guess his medals and promotion give him the right to cuss like a freaking maniac now. Josh I could see sayin' that—war or no war—

JAKE: What do you mean? Josh's always been a great guy.

EMILY: Josh Hightower? Dad! Gimme a break! He's one o' the meanest boys ever went through our school and church. Remember the time he stepped on that Lonesome Dove quarterback's hand with his cleat and broke three of his bones?

JAKE: But that was an accident—

EMILY: Accident? Then how come he was braggin' about doin' it in the locker room after the game? He told Shane he had a better shot at the guy's other hand, but he wanted to get his throwin' hand.

JAKE: Gosh, Emily, football—

EMILY: And I remember when I was in seventh grade, half the school was afraid of him stealin' their lunch.

JAKE: But Emily, boys—

EMILY: Well Shane never did it, and neither did any other decent boy I knew. Have you ever worked all day without one bite o' food, Dad? Well try goin' to school all day, then to two or three hours of practice without eatin'. He's a punk.

JAKE, *shaken*: Alright, alright, Em. Gosh. Why didn't you ever tell me any o' this before?

EMILY: Dad, I heard my brother use maybe three curse words the whole time we were growin' up. And none o' them were the f-word! And what did Mrs. Risinger say to you?

JAKE: Nothin'.

EMILY: Dad, please.

JAKE, *rubbing his temple, weary*: She said she wondered what your mom would think. *Emily just stares at him. After a pause, he looks at her and blurts*, Aw, she an' her husband ha' been mad at me an' the church for a long time.

EMILY: Why is that?

JAKE: Well, he's a commercial airline pilot, an' ever since 9/11, what with the airlines sufferin' and gas prices risin'—

EMILY: That's just great. Well I think I know what Mom'd think.

JAKE: Maybe you do, maybe you don't.

EMILY: In fact, I think I know what Mom mighta thought about a lotta things.

JAKE: What do you mean? *She says nothing.* Emily?

EMILY: Dad, do you have any idea how much Mom would disagree with what you said from the pulpit today about our “righteous cause” in Iraq and how we are “bringin' freedom and dignity to oppressed people” who never had it, an' that the many Christian soldiers in our armies are servin' Christ in— an *unprecedented* was, I believe, the word you used—way, to open the door to spreadin' the gospel where it has been locked out for centuries? Well Shane was sure servin' Him in an unprecedented way at the airport today.

JAKE: What are you talkin' about?

EMILY: If you'd read what Mom wrote from her heart in her journal, you'd know.

JAKE, *jerking straight up*: You been readin' her diary?

EMILY, *shouting*: Yes, an' there's a lot in there, some of it very bothersome!

JAKE: I—I'm not sure what to say to you, Emily. How in the world could you have taken the liberty to read your mother's most private thoughts?

EMILY: I haven't read the most private ones, but I've read plenty. Enough to know, to be pretty sure at least, that she was against the war, no matter what Mr. Hightower or Pantheon Electronics or Halliburton or anyone else says. And you know what else, Dad? I don't think bein' against this war—or even this President—makes you a liberal or a traitor, no matter what Seamus Houlihan or Sean Hannity say. *She stands and walks SL, then turns back to him.* The problem, the very enormous problem, for me is, I have a brother I love more than life itself who is right in the middle of it all. *She chuckles wryly.* Not tonight I guess, though, since he drove off with that good All-American boy Josh Hightower in his pickup truck--without even comin' home after bein' gone nearly a year—an ice chest loaded down with beer in the truck bed. *Beat.* Unprecedented for my

brother, who obeyed his parents' teachings like on ever'thing else an' never took so much as one drink o' alcohol in his life before he went—over there. Guess he obeyed your teachin' on that too. *She storms off SL.*

Jake stares after her, then looks down at the floor, bewildered, shaking his head as if to clear it.

JAKE, *to himself*: Good grief, what else can happen? An' what on earth is in that diary?

ACT IV

Scene Two

Rankin home, day. Emily is collecting her basketball gear and talking with Amy, who is holding a basketball and occasionally bouncing it off the floor.

AMY: I still say Kylie gettin' Whooping Cough and missin' the state semifinals last season—and we still barely lose to Fort Worth Christian, then they win the championship by twenty-five points—was the best thing coulda happened to us this year. She's never been half as dedicated as she is now.

EMILY: Well goody for her. She cost a lotta other girls who worked long an' hard a sure shot at the first state championship our school's ever had in any sport. Those four seniors that graduated didn't deserve gettin' a raw deal just 'cause that arrogant slut 'n her short skirts an' high heels an' heavy purple eye shadow ate nothin' but pizza and Doritos and Starbucks Frappacinos an' stayed up late Instant Messaging boys, then got sick. After all, she'd already been sick twice last season, *before she got Whooping Cough. She slams her athletic bag down on the dining table in fury. Oh!*

AMY: Goodness, Em, catch your breath, girl. You're too young for a heart attack. Especially over—her. *She stares at Emily as the latter begins squirting something out of a tube onto her hands. Oh no, Em, you're not doin' that again?*

EMILY, *rubbing her hands together, tops, bottoms, sides*: Shut up, Amy.

AMY: But super glue to seal the cuts on your hands?

EMILY: Kylie and her precious nails.

AMY: Gimme a break, that's from a hundred different girls—and you havin' your own private practices at 6:00 A.M. ever mornin', in addition to our regular afternoon practices.

EMILY: I ain't wearin' bandages on my hands like against Amarilla.

AMY: You need bandages on your brain, girl. *Emily ignores her and squirts more Super Glue on her hands, then rubs them together again. Look, Em, you gotta try harder to get*

along with Kylie or we'll fall short this year too, good as we are. Y'all don't even look like you're on the same team when you're on the court. You're two o' the best players in Texas an' you hardly ever pass the ball to each other. An' in practice, y'all practically kill each other when you're on opposite sides. You fractured her nose the other day when you gave her that elbow, Emily, even though she won't admit it.

EMILY: Well if it scares any boys off from her, I'm doin' her and them both a favor.

AMY: Em. This is the biggest game o' our lives tonight—so far. Fort Worth Christian's won the private school state championship the last three years. They won that Duncanville tournament last week that always has the state's best public school teams in it. They got two D-1 prospects o' their own, includin' that Shaliqua girl who's already verbaled to Baylor. We've *never* beaten 'em. And Em—Coach Callahan already told us there's gonna be scouts there tonight, includin' from the Big 12. *Beat*. Maybe even—

EMILY: I know, I know, maybe even Sherri Coale. I can't worry about that, though, Amy, I just gotta stay focused and play my best game—

AMY: But that's just what I'm sayin', Emily! You can't let Kylie get in the way o' your own goals. You've worked too hard. I remember in grade school, when the rest of us were playin' dress up and tea parties, you were out there on that driveway wearin' out one net after another on your goal. An' in junior high, when we started likin' boys 'stead o' hatin' 'em—you were shootin' five hundred layups, five hundred jumpers, and a hundred free throws a day—in the off season. And now Emily—you're so close to reachin' the goals you worked for your whole life. *Her voice drops to a near-whisper*. The goals—Shane—didn't get to make.

EMILY, *staring out the window, speaking quietly*: He—he seems diff-erent somehow, Amy.

AMY: Diff-erent? What do you mean?

EMILY, *nodding*: Since he got back, yeah, diff-erent. He's—he's not as close to me. He stays—

AMY: More aloof?

EMILY: Yeah, he's more aloof, like when he's physically in the same room with you, but not mentally? *Amy nods*. And I thought we'd be together all the time when I wasn't in school, but—he's out with that Josh Hightower and other Marines and army guys that have been—over there—a lot more than we even see him around here. *She walks DS*. And I hear him—cussin'—Amy, when he doesn't know anyone is listening, and even sometimes when he does. He never used to cuss at all, Amy, you know that. Remember, even some o' the guys in school an' church used to make fun of him over that? *She shakes her head slowly, her brow crinkled, as though trying to solve a puzzle*. And he must sleep at Josh's and his other friends' houses quite a bit, 'cause a lot o' nights he

doesn't even come home at all. He never did that before, and I don't know why Dad lets him do it now.

AMY: Mary Ann told me once her cousin acted the same way after he'd been over in Afghanistan. She said after he'd been home a while he got back more to normal.

EMILY, *turning toward her*: More to normal?

AMY: Yeah, I think it's pretty usual for guys who been away a long time, 'specially if they been in—danger—you know, it just takes 'em a while to readjust to civilian livin'.

EMILY: Well what about us? What about me? How long does it take for *me* to readjust?

AMY, *holding the basketball out to her*: This is our night, Em—this is *your* night. It's what we been workin' for since we were ten years old. To beat these guys an' show the whole state what we're made of, that we're not just a bunch o' spoiled rich preppy white girls.

EMILY, *grabbing the ball with her super-glued hands, speaking without irony*: After tonight, they'll know diff-erent.

ACT IV

Scene Three

Rankin home, night. Jake and Holt sit at the dining table, drinking coffee and talking. The sound of a radio sitting on the table fills the room with the earlier-heard voices of Hank and Bud describing the live, play-by-play action of the Crooked Trail girls' basketball game against Fort Worth Christian Academy. Loud, raucous crowd noise threatens at times to drown out the announcers.

BUD, *off stage*: Never heard a Crooked Trail crowd this loud before, Hank, and this is a road game.

HANK, *off stage*: I never seen this many Armadilla fans at a game before, and like you said, it's not even at Crooked Trail.

BUD, *off stage*: 'Course, no Crooked Trail team—in any sport—has ever walloped a team this respected on not only the state but the national stage.

HANK, *off stage*: That's right, like we were sayin' earlier, Bud, Fort Worth Christian beat two of the three top teams in the state's largest public school division, Class 5A, to win that Duncanville tournament last week.

BUD, *off stage*: Folks, if you just tuned in and your standin' up, sit down. If you're drivin' down the road, pull over. The score after three quarters o' play—in Fort Worth—

is the Crooked Trail Lady Armadillas sixty-four, an' the undefeated—till tonight—Fort Worth Christian Academy Patriots 39. We'll be back for the fourth and final quarter after these messages from our sponsors.

HOLT, *turning the radio volume down*: Dang, Jake, sounds like Em'ly's flat schoolin' 'em. *A goofy, proud look covers Jake's face.* Ain't that Fort Worth team the one beats all them big Dallas an' Houston public schools?

JAKE: Aw, they beat ever'body, Holt. Includin' us—till tonight. Dang, I shoulda been there, Holt.

HOLT: You couldn't help it, Jake. Part of bein' the pastor o' one o' the blowin' and goin'est churches in the Metroplex, buddy. That phone conference we had tonight with that stud Houston pastor Jeff Slagle to come here with just three weeks notice—why that's just unheard of. I mean, that boy's headin' for havin' one o' the biggest TV ministries in the country. And with him bringin' the Christians fer Israel message to our church. And havin' both our boys up there to say some words that night just before Josh heads back to Iraq—why, that'll prob'ly inspire the folks more'n anything we could come up with with all our church growth charts an' graphs an' surveys and sermon techniques, eh, ole buddy?

JAKE: You're right, it's gonna be one of those old-time revivals like used to happen in the early days o' the country, when the spirit o' God'd just bust loose, without any promptin' from folks, just repentance over sin. This is gonna be the same way, an' on Christmas Eve, no less.

HOLT: Just like Slagle told us tonight, Jake, like God promised Abraham—he who blesses My people, Israel, I'll bless, and he who curses them, I'll curse. Oh Jakie boy, the Lord is gonna crush these Islamo-fascist scum that hate Israel an' us—He's gonna crush 'em to powder, gonna destroy 'em, just like he did Babylon and Assyria and Egypt and Israel's other enemies. But while that's happenin', son—revival gonna bust out all over the place around here, an' without any inklin' on anyone's mind ahead o' time. An' when the folks see our boys—strong 'n good 'n handsome 'n in their uniforms—why, if folks don't come down front—waves of 'em—in tears, and maybe even a little weepin' and gnashin' o' teeth, I'll be shocked as I ever been in my thirteen years at the church. *Tears fill his eyes and his throat grows tight.* Gosh, I'm proud o' our boys, Jake.

JAKE, *nodding his agreement*: Me too, Holt. I'm so proud o' both my kids, how they hung in there, since— *His words trail off, his face grows somber, and his gaze drifts.*

HOLT, *after a beat*: Jake, I wanna run somethin' by ya that I think'd make Daisy awful proud. And I think God may just be in it, 'cause lots o' folks think the same thing, not just me. Fact, it was Jim Dickinson's wife Sara Lee come up with the idea.

JAKE: What idea?

HOLT: Jake, folks are just flat lovin' your Wednesday night series on the End Times—shoot, we're gettin' 'bout as big attendance Wednesday now's Sunday. Leastways it seems that way. It's sure better'n ever before. You're just nailin' it ever week, Pardner. Tell you what, them I-ranians get any more uppity, the Lord may be comin' back even sooner'n you're sayin'. Anyhow, I heard a number o' folks, includin' elders an' deacons both, think you're doin' such a great job on these End Times, they're wonderin' could we just kind-lee flip-flop that with the series you're doin' on Sundays. What with the newest book in the *Left Behind* series just comin' out—the one about the battle o' Armageddon—how could the timin' be any better? At first, I wasn't sure I agreed, but the more I thought about it, 'n the more folks that seem to come to the same conclusion—*He reaches across and pats Jake on the back*. —well, I just think it's great how a lot o' folks in the church seem to be wakin' up to the incredibly gifted preacher we have, an' especially in that all-important area o' the Last Days.

JAKE: Well Holt—

HOLT, *cutting in, qualifying his previous statements*: Nothin' 'gainst what you're preachin' on Sundays, nothin' at all. It's real convictin', an' folks know we need that. Fact, only thoughts I heard about it is if we talk a whole lot about sin and repentance and things like that, and don't emphasize grace and forgiveness enough, why, folks tend to lose hope. 'Specially the younger adults we're tryin' to reach out to. It's hard 'nuff gittin' lot of 'em to darken the door of a church, even ours. Then if they have to listen to bein' told they're a scumbag—now that's not what you're doin', I'm not sayin' that, Jake, you know what I mean—but if we hit 'em too hard, why they might lose hope an' think they's no way they're good 'nuff for us—then they just go down the road to Friendship, or The Heat, or The Cross and the People or one o' those other megachurches where sometimes they just broadcast their pastor—I mean teachin' elder—in from another church location. 'Course you and know that's sure not true—about good preachin' takin' away hope—like you say, “it just takes a little leaven to spoil the lump, and we got a whole lotta leaven aroun' here!”

JAKE: But Holt, we all agreed last summer I'd preach this Sunday mornin' series. We all agreed we need it, especially in light o' what happened with Jimmy our youth pastor and those girls and the families suin' us and all.

HOLT, *sighing, rubbing his temple*: Look, buddy. The folks—the seekers, the carnal Christians, the faithful Christians alike—they know they're sinners. If they're from aroun' here, which at least some of 'em are, they been hearin' it most o' their lives, even if they ain't been regular in church attendance. You just git that 'round these parts. The others—well, I'm sure even up north their Catholic priests made 'em confess fer what they did wrong in that confession booth dilly, even if they weren't believers an' he wadn't either. Hell—heck—my point is, these folks git beat up by life, they git beat up at work, they been beat up about God—shoot, the Cowboys ain't even any good any more—can't we just let 'em have one place they can come where they can relax an' not get hammered or judged? Let God's Word and the Holy Spirit convict 'em, buddy. Do *we* always have to be the ones doin' it? Shoot, we jist scare off as many as ever stay.

Shouldn't we have the "mind of Christ" and be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves"?"

Jake starts to shake his head, but has to fight back an admiring, affectionate grin.

HOLT, *seeing the expression as a ray of hope*: And man alive, ain't no subject better to preach hope with than the End Times, right? Shoot, Charlie Ganter over at Rainbow Christian near Sunset said he preached a 50-week series on the Last Days—50 weeks!—took off only for Christmas and Easter, and size o' their church nearly tripled that year. Tell you man, you'll grow the church back to the size it was 'fore all that Jimmy stuff happened, an' then some—an' with folks full o' joy an' confidence an' hope!

JAKE: Well. *Beat*. Guess I can work in plenty o' sin an' repentance in an End Times message, just like I can with any other topic, probably more'n most, matter o' fact.

HOLT, *pounding Jake's shoulder, pumping his hand*: That's the Jake Rankin I know! *He cuts loose a Rebel yell*. Well, might as well tell ya, buddy, I was gonna surprise ya at the Christmas Eve service, but I jist can't wait. Know that primo sound and light system we wanted for the new auditorium, the one with all the Jumbotrons an' the sound system for concerts and all the lights for drama—the one that was \$150,000 more'n we had in our budget? *Jake nods, his eyes widening in hope*. Turns out bein' chairman o' Pantheon's non-profit foundation this year paid off just like I hoped it would. *Beat*. Brother Jake, they gonna hear us from miles around!

JAKE, *letting loose his own Rebel yell—at least a semi-Rebel yell*. *Beat*. But you thought your board had those funds earmarked for rebuildin' that church we accidentally bombed in Baghdad.

HOLT: Them Iraqis don't want Christ, Jake. They been rejectin' him for what, 2,000 years now? Any of 'em want 'im already fled the country, an' the rest—well I wouldn't give a plugged nickel for their future. Ter'rists gonna hose 'em all. Now don't git me wrong, Jake, I think it's a great idea to build churches over there, just not yet. Besides, I know the Bible says to preach the gospel to every livin' thing, but a lotta folks I know—includin' some good men, real good men—'d say that preachin' it to the dang Muslims is carryin' it a bit too far. After all, we got a war to win. *He considers his own words for a moment*. After all, what would it be like, our Christian soldiers havin' to shoot other Christian soldiers? Once they calm down—the outlaw few that's raisin' all the cain—well then we can send all the money we can to build churches, train pastors, an' Pantheon'll build churches over there too, includin' to replace those we take out with Pantheon missiles and rockets, like 'at one in Baghdad. Oh, turn the radio back up, Jake!

Jake does so and the audio of Emily's basketball game resumes.

GAME CROWD, *off-stage, chanting and stomping the bleachers in cadence to the chant*: C.T.A.! C.T.A.! C.T.A.!

BUD, *off stage, his voice rising as the noise of the crowd continues to escalate*: It's a feat that if I hadn't witnessed with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it happened. An' neither I think would the one thousand five hunderd fans assembled here tonight.

HANK, *off stage*: Not to mention media representatives from all the big Metroplex newspapers and TV stations, as well as college scouts scattered all over the crowd tonight to watch Fort Worth Christian's Heidi Reinhardt and Shaliqua Jefferson, and our own Emily Rankin and Kylie Hightower.

BUD, *off stage*: Well they've seen plenty of Kylie and Emily tonight—those two have combined for over fifty points and more than thirty rebounds between them—but Shaliqua Jefferson has already fouled out and Heidi Reinhardt has exactly two points since Fort Worth's hot-shooting first quarter.

HANK, *off stage*: I see both Rankin and Hightower comin' back out on the floor with just six minutes remainin' and the Lady Armadillos up twenty-five.

BUD, *off stage*: Yes, and I saw 'em makin' their case to Coach Callahan in a rather animated fashion during that Fort Worth timeout. Looked like they were fightin' for a couple more minutes of playin' time. Whatever the case, they're makin' a statement to the women's basketball world across the state o' Texas tonight. It's 64-39 Lady Armadillas as Reinhardt takes the in bounds pass and tries to get the ball up the floor—but it's stolen by Rankin! She pitches it to Calhoun who's got a three-on-two with Hightower fillin' one lane and Rankin the other. Calhoun almost has it stolen back by Reinhardt, but gets it back to Rankin. Emily's got Hightower wide open under the basket, jumpin' up and down and wavin' her arms, but she's gonna take it herself. She blows past one player—wow—just about fakes the other off her feet, and takes it straight to the basket and lays it in!

HANK, *off stage, the crowd roaring*: Oh!

BUD, *off stage*: What a play! What a shot!

HANK, *off stage*: Look out though.

BUD, *off stage*: Oh goodness, Rankin hit the floor hard after that—

HANK, *off stage*: Reinhardt went straight under her and chopped her legs out from her, Bud! That looked like an awful play to me, very possibly a cheap shot. Oh my—

Jake stands straight up from his chair.

BUD, *off stage*: Gemini Christmas, Hank, all heck's breakin' loose out there. Amy Calhoun just tackled Reinhardt into the wall at that end of the court and they look to be on the ground fightin', with Amy on top! The officials better get on top o' this in a hurry, other girls are runnin' toward the scrap.

HANK, *off stage*: But Emily Rankin is writhing on the floor in pain, Bud. Looked like she came down hard on her knee. She was way up in the air.

BUD, *off stage*: Folks, Emily's leg is bent at the knee, but it looks like from here—it looks like from here it's bent the wrong way.

Jake rushes out the door without a word, Holt following him an instant later.

INTERMISSION

ACT V

Scene One

Rankin home, night. Emily sits back in the recliner chair, one leg in a cast and propped up on the matching ottoman. Her crutches rest within arm's reach. Daisy's diary sits in her lap.

EMILY, *speaking to a nearby picture of Daisy*: Well Mom, I finished today. Guess that's one thing about this—injury—I get to read your diary more. My schedule's just a little bit open nowadays. Oh well, I read the final entry you ever made, just a couple days before you—just a couple of days before . . . *Her voice trails off and she looks down.* It's just all so confusin', Mom. You—you just totally sorta changed—your thinkin', Mom. At least in some ways. *She grabs the book, turns to the end, and reads.* In some ways it sounds just like you, but in others, it's different from what I heard you say before, Mom. *She looks down at the diary and reads silently.*

DAISY, *off stage*: I have come to the considered conclusion that my likely imminent passin' from this vale o' tears into a better world is, as with all o' God's doin's, most beneficially timed for all, even if we do not now, nor ever, grasp the wisdom o' His Providence. Perhaps I have read too many articles online—and online is somewhere I hardly ever was until my recent incapacitation!—but the treatise I read today regardin' the historical Christian principles o' Just War has my soul troubled in more ways than I can estimate.

EMILY, *looking toward Daisy's picture*: But what are the Christian principles of Just War? *Again, she looks down at Daisy's diary and reads to herself.*

DAISY, *off stage*: The heartbreakin' truth is, if our Christian president goes forward with his apparent plan to attack the small nation of Iraq, located halfway around the world from us, and which has done nothin' to us, it will break nearly every principle o' Just War theory, includin' that o' proportionate response, which even Holt Hightower boasts we can kiss goodbye whenever we get 'nto a shootin' war. “Like Rush Limbaugh says,” Holt loves to point out, “war is about breakin' things and killin' people.” I wonder how Rush would know that, as I don't believe he has ever served in the military, in the midst

o' his multiple broken marriages. Nor have any of those marriages ever produced children whom he might have to worry himself sick over.

EMILY: Ouch. *She chuckles without mirth.* Well Mom always was a straight shooter. That's one of the things didn't change about her. In fact, like I said, it does seem like the old Mom, just workin' her way through somethin' she was tryin' to decide what to believe about. It's just I'm so surprised what she decided to believe about this one. *She looks back down to silently read some more of the diary.*

DAISY, *off stage*: Well, now my son is one o' those who'll likely be called upon to break things and kill people, and perhaps be broken or killed himself. How cold my blood runs when I watch our good 'n decent president surrounded by shrewder, less-righteous men an' women than himself, who have their own agendas. Like the Just War article says, how can Christians support sendin' an army of M-16-totin' soldiers into spiritually-blackened countries where we should instead be sendin' an army o' John 3:16-spoutin' missionaries? And yet, what can I say to anyone? My own son is a Marine, an' ever' Christian I know says you can't support the troops if you don't support their mission. My husband is pastor of a dynamic, God-blessed church that's literally burstin' at the seams, with people, many o' them military families, who would turn on him like ravenous beasts if he dared utter one sentiment questionin' the righteousness of our president and his conductin' the war on terror. And my poor sweet conflicted Emily—*Emily gasps slightly as she re-reads these words.* —the last thing she needs at this difficult stage o' her life is more confusion, more conflict, more reasons to have resentment between her an' her friends. So I must content myself to share my thoughts with You, Lord, an' pray for all of 'em. I will not likely be around for the conclusion o' the “cakewalk” one gov'ment official has promised us if we invade Iraq, though we are assured it will be over with quickly. As always, I ask Your guidance on my actions and thinkin', and I entrust the welfare of my beloveds—including dear Sharmonique—to Your trustworthy safekeepin'.

Emily stares at the page as a clock somewhere in the house tolls twice, for 2 a.m. She looks up at the ceiling and sighs.

EMILY: Oh why did I ever open that blasted diary? Why? Why did I do it? I knew from the start it was wrong. I heard that little voice tellin' me not to—the voice you can't hear and that you want to ignore because it always says the things you least wanna be told. But I went ahead 'n read anyway, the safe parts only, I thought, but it turns out there weren't 'ny safe parts, there never are, especially what you think is safe, like Mom bein' here and Shane doin' the right thing and everybody lovin' and respectin' Daddy. *Her head lolls to one side and she closes her eyes.* I'm too tired to think about it, I'll think about it tomorrow. I don't have to brush my teeth either, 'cause Dad's with somebody at the hospital an' Shane's out again an' there's no one here to tell me to.

She lays still and her breathing deepens. After a moment, the door bursts open and Shane saunters in. He takes off his coat and pitches it onto the couch, then sees Emily,

sleeping. A mischievous look crosses his face and he creeps across to her, leans down, then screams into her ear.

SHANE: No, Emily, no!

EMILY: Ahh!

She jerks awake, screaming herself. As Shane stands there and howls with laughter, she regains her wits. Her face curls up.

SHANE: Oh gosh, Em, that was fun—

EMILY: You silly, stupid boy. Do you really think mints an' mouthwash cover up the stench of a person who reaks o' alcohol and cigar smoke? *Shane stares at her, then looses an embarrassed laugh.* And thanks a lot for tellin' Colt Shahan and your old football buddies what a "loudmouth jabberbox" I am. *She reaches up and slugs him hard several times on his arm and shoulder, before he backs out of reach.*

SHANE, *cringing back to escape the blows*: Well I didn't exactly say it that way. *He grits his teeth to stifle the laughter that is trying again to get out.* I mainly said it was *Beano* that was a loudmouth jabberbox. *His first hoot of laughter barely squirts out before Emily manages to reach out and land several more blows on him.*

SHANE: Jesus, girl! All that ball's made you too strong! *A phone rings on the table next to Emily. He scoops it up and speaks into it:* Who? Oh, hey Sharmonique, yeah this is her brother. Hold on she's right here. *Fury filling her face, Emily shakes her head no and nearly jumps up from the chair to escape. Shane whispers—too loudly because of his drinking:* Emily, it's that little black girl— *Emily shakes her head even more fiercely and slugs Shane in the shoulder again, hard.* Ow, damn, girl! Oh, no, Shamony, I wasn't talkin' to you, uh, I stubbed my danged toe on the—the, uh, wall. *Beat.* No I'm sorry, Sham honey, I was mistaken, Emily's already asleep. Hey, it's late, you know what time it is? Ain't you pretty young? *Pause, as Sharmonique speaks on the other end of the call.* You're what? Oh. Okay, well I'll try to wake her— *Emily shakes her head with such force that Shane, even in his drunken stupor, fears she will reinjure her leg.* Dang, calm down, girl. No, Shammay, I wadn't talkin' to you, I was just tellin' myself to calm down. You see, Emily's not only asleep, she's sick and she's on her period—I mean she's on all sorts o' strong medication. You know, the kind the doctor says if you try to wake up from it you could go to sleep permanent-like? Yeah, that's what I'm talkin' about. Your brother was on it too? *His expression drops.* Oh, it did kill him when he tried to wake up, huh? Yeah, well, uh, can I have Emily call you back in the mornin'? *Beat.* Okay, I'll do that. Sorry about your brother too. Oh, he was your step-brother. Well I'm still sorry. *He hangs up the phone.* Christ, Emily, the little girl's scared to death 'cause her mom never come home from work an' she's alone there all night with two little babies of her older sister.

EMILY, *with scorn for both Shane and Sharmonique*: It ain't her older sister, it's her freakin' *niece*! Yeah, figure that one out, genius—when you sober up. And her mom *never* comes home till mornin' 'cause she's a hooker and a meth addict. Sharmonique just usually goes to sleep an' doesn't know it.

SHANE, *staring at her*: Well why in the hell won't you help her out? Didn't Mom make you promise to take care of her?

EMILY, *spewing anger, while feeling no little conviction regarding Sharmonique*: Mom? And what do you s'pose Mom'd think about your smokin' and drinkin' and cussin' and chasin' ho bags like Kylie Hightower!

SHANE, *stunned*: Kylie?

EMILY, *with venom*: Oh don't even try, Shane. She told the whole school—me first, o' course, bein' the hateful slut tard she is—how you put the moves on 'er after the Lonesome Dove boys basketball game the other night. Thanks a lot! She *knots her fist up to slug him again, but he backs out of reach, not laughing any more. Her shoulders sag, she lowers her fist, and slumps back into the recliner.* Mom'd be real proud o' you. *She looks away, her eyes shiny.*

Shane lowers his head and leaves the room.

ACT V

Scene Two

Church, Sunday morning worship service. The stage is dark except for the forestage, where Jake kneels alone, eyes closed, Bible before him

JAKE, *speaking aloud*: I pray all these things in Jesus' name, amen. *He opens his eyes, smiles, and looks toward the ceiling.* Lord, my heart is full. Ole Holt gives me more headaches than anyone in my life prob'ly, but he brings me more joy and blessing, too—aside from Shane and Emily 'course. Oh please cheer 'er up, Lord, and help 'er see Your hand in this injury. And if she can't see Your hand, help her trust Your heart. *Pause.* Oh thank the Lord I trusted Holt on the End Times series. And today— *He stands and moves DS.* —why, we've already had three services! 'Course, who couldn't draw five or six thousand people with Dr. Jeff Slagle, pastor o' the Hope Church in Houston, bringin' the message? He may be TV evangelist John Hagee's most famous—and highest TV-rated—disciples. Ole Holt. Glad-handin' all those dignitaries out there today. Most 'em prob'ly came 'cause he invited 'em. Two state legislators—at least. Couple o' mayors. city councilmen and county commissioners. Lieutenant Guv' nor o' the state. Our Republican Congressman. And some o' these folks already attended church somewhere else today. That ole rascal. Those folks ain't fools. They know how much cash an' influence Pantheon—an' Holt personally—have funneled into 'em gettin' and stayin' elected. And Holt's brainstorm to go ahead and serve the pot luck feast to those who couldn't get in the packed out third service, then hold a spur-o'-the-moment fourth

service for ‘em now, while ever’one else went to the Sunday dinner—dang, what a stroke! Then Holt hisself brings out ever’ piece o’ fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cole slaw, and rolls in a ten mile radius to do it—the guy’s unflappable! *He walks around, considering the situation.* But it ain’t just Holt. Nearly the whole choir, the entire praise band, an’ all the ministers leapt at the call to stay for a fourth service. *Suddenly he stops, looking out into space and over the audience, his voice quieter, his words, slower, seeming to contemplate something far beyond himself.* Like he said—with brave young men like our sons, and Jeff Slagle, this might be the day true—*revival*—busts loose in this church, and through the power o’ Almighty God . . . *Beat.* Why, it could sweep right across the whole country. *As the congregation in the nearby sanctuary—still darkened to us—booms out Our God Is An Awesome God, his eyes and mind focus on something even greater, wider, farther away—though maybe not so far as he had always thought. His next words come as though he has stepped onto holy ground never before seen, and perhaps even into a holy presence.* What if—this—right here, right now, on this campus—is the new— *Beat.* Great Awakening, for which we’ve all prayed an’ worked for so long? And Jeff Slagle—goodness gracious, big an’ tall an’ handsome an’ charismatic. Looks like a Hollywood movie star, ‘cept he’s prob’ly not a fag like most of ‘em are behind their closets or wherever they are. So what if he believes in some things we don’t, like tongues and healin’ and faithfulness to God leadin’ to health and wealth? *He tightens the knot of his bright silk tie and turns in the direction of the sanctuary, where the congregation’s singing of the song is so loud it shakes the building.* Well alright then. Here goes number four! *He moves US from the forestage into the church sanctuary, which now lights up to reveal Emily (still wearing her leg cast), Amy, Tommy, Mary Ann, Mrs. Hightower, Rog, and Kylie, and on the chancel area behind the pulpit, Holt, Josh, and DR. JEFF SLAGLE. Shane is absent. Jake walks up to the glass lectern.*

JAKE, *to the congregation:* Well folks, I don’t think this fella needs much introduction. We been lookin’ forward to him comin’ for weeks an’ now he’s fixin’ to lay it on us for the fourth time today! *He turns toward where Slagle sits behind him.* Gosh, I didn’t think about that, Pastor—you gonna charge us extra fer this bonus sermon?

The congregation laughs.

SLAGLE: Yeah, Pastor, but all those proceeds’ll go toward the trip costs for your folks to come on our next Christians for Israel-sponsored tour of the Holy Land.

CONGREGATION, *with some applause:* Yes! Alright! Sign me up!

JAKE, *to the congregation:* Hey I better sit down before I commit more of y’all’s money than I already have. Let’s give Dr. Jeff Slagle a rousing Crooked Trail welcome!

He leads the congregation in a spirited applause, as Slagle stands, walks to the lectern, and shakes Jake’s hand, before facing the congregation.

SLAGLE, *with inflections and a cadence like a young John Hagee:* Friends, I hope you are bein’ faithful to support an’ pray for your pastors. Men like Pastor Jake Rankin here

are no less than the spiritual generals of America. He is on the front line of ferocious spiritual combat between the friends an' enemies o' God. And— *Beat.* —I guess I wouldn't be outa line to tell ya Jake's gonna be a heck of a lot closer to the center o' the front line now, 'cause he's the newest pastor to join the Christians fer Israel ranks, workin' with us fer America, fer Israel, and fer Jesus! *Applause erupts from the congregation and continues for thirty seconds as the assembly rises to their feet. Slagle shifts into high gear as the ovation finally peters out and burns his gaze into the congregation.* Dear friends, you do know we are livin' in the last days?

CONGREGATION: Yes!

SLAGLE: Soon the Lord o' history will *return* in power and glory and He will *right* ever' wrong, *balance* ever' scale, *remedy* ever' injustice, an' *hurl* ever' vain imagined religion created by the darkened mind o' man into the outer darkness. *A guttural roar seems to roil up from the bowels of the worship center and resound off the walls and ceiling in a series of ebbs and tides as Slagle times his delivery to complement it.* The outer darkness, where the teeth o' the wicked who have hurt and damaged others will be blunted an' there will be only weeping an' gnashing o' those teeth! *The congregation roars again.* And yet, brothers and sisters, these are the most exciting days in church history. Even as we now face the most dangerous moment in history for America.

CONGREGATION: Yes! Amen! That's right!

SLAGLE: We all know who is the apple o' 'God's eye, don't we?

CONGREGATION: Yes! Israel!

SLAGLE: Even if the talkin' heads in New York and the power-mongers in Washington and the sickos in Hollywood don't know, we do, right, beloved? *The congregation lets loose a roar of conviction.* And we remember that long ago Jehovah God Himself told Abraham that those who bless him and his seed, God would bless—and those who curse them, God would curse to the uttermost. *This congregational roar borders on a mass scream.* And even if none o' these sophisticated folks on the coasts or in Europe or in the dark Islamic world remember, we do—right, beloved? *This time, it is a mass scream.* And if the apple o' God's eye, the jewel o' His crown, the chosen o' His people is threatened or bullied—*He* will not bandy words, *He* will not negotiate treaties, *He* will not barter with His enemies and ours, *He* will not dance a Texas two-step with those who have defied the banners o' Christ for over a thousand years— *A mass scream erupts that would have shook the stained glass windows of the worship center, had there been any windows.* --No—*He* will deal with His enemies as He always has when the end o' His long-suffering forbearance comes, He will rise up in holy righteous anger and strike down the wicked against whom His wrath is kindled ever' day!

Jake leaps from his seat along with the rest of the congregation, and he launches the second, and louder, standing ovation of the day. It muffles Slagle's last couple of sentences.

SLAGLE: Jesus Himself said He came not to bring peace, but with a sword! Like our dear brother Dr. Jerry Falwell--a great friend to Israel Himself--said, "God is a god o' war!"

CONGREGATION: Yes!

SLAGLE: He is a god o' what?

CONGREGATION: War!

SLAGLE: What?

CONGREGATION: War!!

SLAGLE, *arms crossed, in apparent deep contemplation, knowing he has the congregation's rapt attention*: Now we're about finished--

CONGREGATION: No!

SLAGLE: Yeah, we gotta get you home in time for the Cowboys' kickoff, which Pastor Rankin sagely included within the terms o' the church's kind invitation for me to speak! *General laughter spreads through the congregation.* Alright, look. I know because o' the ACLU, I'm not supposed to say anything with the whiff o' politics in it--

CONGREGATION: No! Go ahead, preach it!

SLAGLE: Naw, I want to be careful, even though there is no such idiocy in the Constitution as that so-called wall between church and state the liberals keep tellin' us about, and even though liberals—including some past governors o' this state—won't hesitate to step into the pulpit of a black church or a liberal white church and preach how just and biblical is the socialistic welfare state. *He steps around the glass lectern and hurries forward, lowering his voice to stem another roar that is forming.* Beloved, you need to pray for George W. Bush.

CONGREGATION: Yes.

SLAGLE: I happen to know that some o' the godliest men in this nation have his ear—some o' them Texans. They meet with him because *this* president is a true Christian—not just a photo-op Bible-carryin' sort. *The congregational clamor begins again.* And *this* president wants to make sure not only that he has God's ear, but that God has his! *As a mini-roar bursts forth, Slagle walks down the steps onto the floor and out into the audience itself. The congregation quietens.* Pray for George W. Bush, beloved, because, indeed, I do fervently believe we are in the last days, an' any good born-again, Bible-

believin', *Left Behind*-readin' Christian knows what that means. *This pseudo-levity brings chuckles as he walks among the parishioners like a crouched tiger ready to spring upon his unsuspecting prey.* It means the Anti-Christ, even now, somewhere, is likely walkin' the same earth in which we live, breathin' the same air we breathe, warmed by the same sun as us. He may be the leader of a nation like Syria or Iran that help comprise what the President so astutely called the Axis of Evil, or even America—if Hillary or some other liberal Democrat wins next November. *Again, some in the congregation boo.* Or, more likely, one o' the nations, as our great Secretary o' State Donald Rumsfeld calls them, of "Old Europe," or more likely still, the leader o' the European Union. In any event, we know he will be a homosexual—your pastor, I understand, has covered that with you in the past—and he will be as winsome and charismatic as Lucifer the Mornin' Star hisself, and as wicked. *Reaching one end of the congregation, he stops, whirls around, and his voice booms forth like never before.* And make no mistake about it, beloved, the apple o' God's eye--Israel--will soon be compelled to strike out to defend herself—with or without America's help. Good men we know high in this administration—and I mean *high*, beloved—advise us her target will likely be the very seat o' Islamo-fascism, that cauldron of iniquitous, female-persecutin', Christ-denyin' savagery; that perch of a mockin' scoffin' tyrant who carries both the views and the legacy o' Hitler. I speak of *Iran*, beloved, and her burgeoning nuclear facilities, which our high government friends tell us will soon be equipped to produce some o' the most lethal and horrific weapons ever conceived by man. *He begins to head back toward the lectern.* You see, lambs, soon—very soon, I believe—Israel will have no choice *but* to strike out. Such a strike is not sinful or unchristian, any more than was our own against the monstrous evil of Saddam Hussein. As the President said, it is preemptive in nature. A stainless blow for the good, the right, virtuous, and against the dark, the cruel, the godless. Goodness vanquishing evil through the might o' the Lord. No, dear ones, Israel would stand in open defiance of Almighty God *not* to do so. And here is where the Word o' God is so very illuminating to us, beloved, in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel and elsewhere, which indicate very clearly that this strike will provoke Russia—who desires Persian Gulf oil for itself--to lead a coalition of Arab nations against Israel.

As he mounts the carpeted steps and returns to the glass lectern, an atmosphere of electricity and anticipation grips the congregation.

AMY, *to Emily*: I love this guy!

ROG, *to Emily*: Emily, does the Bible really say all this?

EMILY: Sure--at least, I think it does. *She nods vigorously.* Yes, it does, Rog, it's all true.

ROG, *nodding his head*: Okay.

SLAGLE: Then God will wipe out all but one-sixth o' this Russian-led army—just as the book o' Revelations chronicles--as the world watches, with a shock and awe such as we have never before experienced, not even when our boys--and girls--kicked another

would-be Hitler's big back side, Saddam Hussein.

CONGREGATION: Amen! Yes!

KYLIE: Yo Josh!

The congregation laughs and cheers, and some clap. Amy and Emily glance toward Kylie, then share a spiteful look with each other. Josh laughs.

AMY: Yo, Shane!

EMILY, *in a loud whisper, grabbing her arm, half laughing*: Amy, shush!

A grinning Tommy reaches over to Rog and gives him a high five.

AMY: Where is he today, anyway?

EMILY: Uh, he an' Colt Shahan went deer huntin' down in the Hill Country.

AMY: Oh. Haven't seen him here much since he got back.

EMILY: No.

SLAGLE, *nodding*: Amen indeed. But lest we grow too comfortable in our knowledge o' these certain, likely-soon, events, perhaps we should remember somethin' else from Ezekiel. Did you know that He predicted the unleashing of fire upon those who live in security in the coastlands? *He turns toward where Jake sits behind him.* I know Pastor Rankin has discussed this in recent weeks as well, how these “coastlands” likely include the United States of America. *Jake nods in concurrence.* Well, we may rightfully be proud of our nation—after all, it is the greatest nation in the history of the world-- *He raises a hand to stillbirth another roar.* --but Ezekiel warns o' judgment on all who stand by while this Russian-led force attacks Israel. Remember, these are *Russians*, people. Their official name may no longer be Communist, but I have other high-placed friends who tell us--despite what the godless liberal mainstream media tells us--they are still Communist to the bone over there. Folks, this is a people who has had to have--who has *demande*d, I daresay--tyrants, dictators, and mass murderers to lead them for a thousand years, all the way back to Ivan the Terrible. Young people, just ask your parents and grandparents what it was like growin' up under the constant threat o' Soviet Russian nuclear attack, every day o' their lives, from the crib on. Nuclear fallout shelters, atomic bomb drills at school, the Cuban Missile Crisis. And by the way, don't you think they woulda turned our cities into ragin' cauldrons o' fire and death if they'd o' thought they had any chance in the world of escapin' the righteous and overwhelming retaliation they knew would come and destroy them?

CONGREGATION: Amen! That's right! Sure would have!

SLAGLE: So Ezekiel issues a warning to America as clear as it is terrifyin': defend my people Israel or suffer my wrath along with Russia and Iran and the others. *Now he leans forward with unsurpassed intensity.* Could it be that America, who apparently refuses to defend Israel from the Russian invasion, will experience nuclear warfare on our own east and west coasts? *He raises his burgundy leather Bible from the glass lectern.* Genesis 12:3, where God promises Israel: "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you," offers a resounding "Yes!"

TOMMY, *uncharacteristically, amidst more general applause from the congregation:*
Smoke 'em!

SLAGLE: To fill the resultant power vacuum left by God's wipin' out—finally--the Russian army, the Antichrist will rule a one-world government, a one-world currency, and a one-world religion for three and a half years. Only the geniuses on those two coasts we mentioned a moment ago might not o' noticed how all three of these things are already comin' into reality. *Pause, to allow laughter.* The demonic world leader will next be confronted by a false prophet--I believe your pastor has told you in previous weeks how that is Communist China, probably the most hateful, brutal empire in the history of the world, and an avowed enemy of our country--at Armageddon, the Mount o' Megiddo, in Israel. As these gathered legions of outlaws and enemies o' God and His people prepare for the final battle, Jesus Hissself will return on a white horse and cast both villains--and their legions of unbelievin' followers--into that lake o' fire that burns forever with brimstone. And thus begins the millennial kingdom o' the Lord o' Glory, the Captain of our salvation! *As the congregational tumult gathers, Slagle shoves a finger at the audience.* And make no mistake about it--when Jesus returns for his millennial reign, the righteous are going to rule the nations of the earth. When Jesus Christ comes back, he's not going to ask the ACLU if it's alright to pray, he's not going to check with the churches about ordaining pedophile bishops and priests, he's not going to inquire whether it's all right to put the Ten Commandments in the statehouses, he's not going to consult the United States Supreme Court's opinion on abortion--He's gonna run the world by the word o' God!

CONGREAGATION: Oh! Yes!

SLAGLE, *looking heavenward, spreading his arms, and shouting:* I say, let the day come, Lord! If it takes war, let it come! If it takes pestilence, let it come! If it takes fire, let it come!

CONGREGATION: Yes! Let it come! Yes!

SLAGLE: For we your followers remember that we shall not be here to suffer through any of it. We shall all have been raptured up and out, and the wicked and unbelievers will get, at least for a short while, what they have always wanted—a world without You! Oh God, let it come!

A roar before which all the previous are as peeps explodes through the worship center as the congregation rises to its feet. Emily has to hold her hands to her ears, and even then, they hurt.

SLAGLE: Let it come!

Amidst the sustained ovation, a smiling Jake joins Slagle at the pulpit and shakes his hand. Slagle smiles, waves to the congregation, then returns to his seat behind the pulpit.

JAKE, *as the applause subsides*: I cannot thank Dr. Jeff Slagle enough for stayin' and preachin' a fourth time today!

SLAGLE, *standing from his chair, Bible in hand, and shouting*: I'm ready for a fifth round if y'all are!

With this, sustained applause sweeps the worship center. Never has the room shook to its foundation like this.

CONGREGATION: We love you Jake! Yeah Jake! Daisy!

JAKE, *smiling and turning to Josh, seated in a cushioned chair across the stage from Slagle*: And our boys. *Pause. Y'all— His voice cracks. He turns to the crowd and stammers.* How proud Daisy would be. *Some in the congregation began to choke or sob aloud. There is probably no dry eye in the building. He looks upward, impassioned.* How proud I am, honey. You done so good, honey! *Now the congregation's roar comes from deep inside everyone, from the heart.* After folks settle down, Jake looks down at Holt, on the third row.

JAKE, *to Holt at his seat at the front of the congregation*: I'm gonna embarrass couple o' folks now. Holt, you and Rog come on up here.

Holt rises and heads toward the pulpit, but Rog, stiff, hesitates.

EMILY: Go on, Rog, it's okay, everyone wants to see you.

ROG, *shaking his head*: No, I—I shouldn't. I don't deserve—

TOMMY, *patting him on the back*: We love ya, buddy.

Rog stares at both of them, seeming confused, then slowly rises and walks toward the pulpit.

JAKE, *as Holt arrives at the pulpit*: Now it probably wouldn't shock y'all to know that, like many times before, if it wadn't for Holt here's generosity, we could never o' pulled off havin' a famous man like Dr. Slagle here today. *He holds up a small piece of paper.* And now to really embarrass him. He wrote me a note a little while ago sayin' if we

promised to hold another God and Country rally like we had last fall with it, and to ante up enough cash, could we get Seamus Houlihan or Sean Hannity to come preach like Dr. Slagle did today?

CONGREGATION: What? Wow! Amen!

JAKE: Holt says maybe they could do their show from here?

HOLT: Now you weren't supposed to tell all that, Jake! Goodness gracious. *He looks out on the congregation.* I know, I know, before y'all say anything, I know they're both Catholics, but like Jake here's said before, some Catholics are Christians too, right? *A mixture of support and murmurs rises from the congregation, but it gradually gives way to cheers and more applause. Holt's face lights up as an idea comes to him.* What the heck, we just won't have 'em speak on anything where they're off track, like Mary or priests or drinkin' or gettin' saved by doin' enough good things or confessin' in that booth dilly--uh, oh well, maybe we could have 'em speak and Jake here'd correct 'em if they say anything wrong on their theology!

The congregation laughs and claps as Holt walks to Josh and sits down next to him.

EMILY, *to Amy*: Swear you won't tell anyone? *Amy shakes her head no.* Dad told me Dr. Slagle's speakin' fee was \$50,000, and Mr. Hightower paid all but \$5,000 of it. He also paid for \$20,000 of his books and got a \$5,000 check from Pantheon for Dr. Slagle and the people who came with him's hotel and other expenses up from Houston in their church's private, non-profit jet.

AMY: No!

EMILY: Don't tell anybody!

AMY: I won't, I promise.

JAKE, *as Rog arrives at the pulpit*: Alright, we'll talk more about confession booths and drinkin' later. *He puts an arm around Rog's shoulder as the congregation laughs again:* We just wanted to take a minute here to introduce you to Rog Hussaini. Normally our godly young youth pastor, Matt Stoner, would do these honors, but Matt had to leave to teach his weekly Bible Study to the two hundred young people at our Hispanic mission church. So I'm pinch hittin' for him today. Anyhow, this here young fella, his real name is Rasheed, but I understand the youth group has christened him "Rog." I hope those o' you who attend Crooked Trail will say hi to him when you see him in the halls or in youth group, where he's become a regular the last few weeks. And when you do, I hope you'll count your blessings. Here's an 18-year-old young man raised in a Moslem home in Iraq whose father was tortured by Saddam Hussein's thugs and whose family barely got out the country with their lives. They could only afford to send Rog to America; the rest of 'em are strugglin' to survive in Syria. Like Holt says, they just went from the fire

to the fryin' pan! *He pats Rog warmly on the shoulder.* Now it's your turn to be embarrassed, buddy. *He steps out of the way and motions Rog to the microphone.*

The congregation begins clapping, which builds into a loud, prolonged, and full-throated ovation. Rog shyly acknowledges the ovation, which finally quiets. He turns toward Holt and Josh, who now stand in front of their seats behind the pulpit.

ROG: Thank you and thank America. *He turns back to the congregation.* God bless you. *The congregation cheers and claps yet again.*

HOLT, *stepping again to the microphone:* All I can say is I'm not worthy o' the other men who have stood up here today— *He glances at Josh.* —and I'm not worthy o' the men who are now. Thanks in large part to Matt Stoner, our youth ministry's bigger and more dynamic now than on its best day before Matt got here. And this fine young man is just another testament to that fact. *He turns to Josh.* Josh, you an' Shane and the others? This young man here is what y'all are fightin' for, so he an' his family won't have to be run outa their own country by wicked men. Wicked men, I might add, who would follow him an' his family over here to attack us in our own homes, schools, stores—and churches—if y'all weren't carryin' the fight to 'em over there. *He turns to the congregation.* Amen?

CONGREGATION, *with a thunderous roar:* Amen!

We hear the church Praise Band, beefed up by a guest horn section, launch into the majestic God of Our Fathers as the congregation, stirred and tearful with pride, stands and begins singing the song from lyrics appearing on large screens.

AMY, *turning to Emily:* You haven't been to youth group since you got hurt.

EMILY: I know.

AMY: It's time you came back. Come with me tonight, okay?

EMILY, *biting her lip and pondering that:* I been mad at Shane almost his whole furlough and hated myself for it, but how I love him. *Beat.* Sure—sure I'll come tonight. *She turns toward our audience. Her words are straightforward, but her tone unsure, as though she is trying hard to convince herself of something.* It's true, what chance would people like Rog and his family have if not for us?

The music and singing rise in power and volume as the stage goes dark.

ACT V

Scene Three

Rankin home, late afternoon. Emily sits in the recliner, her leg still in the cast and again propped up on the ottoman. Shane bursts in, sweaty, carrying a basketball, and wearing sweats and sneakers.

EMILY: Ah, finished your game in time for the Wednesday night meal and lesson at church?

SHANE, *stopping, uneasy*: Uh, well—

EMILY: Right. That might make you late for goin' drinkin' with the other golden boy, Josh.

SHANE, *sighing, coming toward her*: Say, you been a bear ever since I got home. What's the matter anyway? *She frowns at him and gives a slight shake of her head.* Hey I mean it. What is it?

EMILY: Shane, I haven't seen you enough since you been home to be much of a bear to you. I don't run in Kylie and Josh Hightower's crowd—and you used to didn't either.

SHANE: There you go again about Ky—

EMILY, *busting loose*: What do you *think's* the matter, Shane? I lost ever'thing I worked for. *She holds out a fistful of letters.* Look at this worthless collection o' scrap paper—recruitin' letters from across Texas, the Big 12, and other D-1 schools for Emily Rankin the basketball star—well that person no longer exists. *She hurls the papers across the room, and they fly in all directions.* It's nothing now—nothing!

SHANE, *after a beat*: Shoot, Emily, girls come back from torn ACLs all the time, and shattered kneecaps too.

EMILY: And girls don't. And the way mine tore, even surgery won't fix it back all the way, and no amount o' rehabilitation will—though I'll have to nearly kill myself rehabbin' just to be able to walk right on it. I'll *never* be as good again.

SHANE: But if you work hard at it—

EMILY: Shane! Workin' hard'll get me back part of the way, but not all. Follow my lips, now—I won't-be-as-good. I won't play in college.

SHANE, *frightened*: What the hell're you talkin' about? Sure you will. You're the best girls play—

EMILY, *crying out, using her hands for emphasis*: My God, Shane! Have the Marines made you foul-mouthed, immoral, a killer, *and* stupid! *She regrets the harsh words immediately, and the more when she sees the hurt covering his stunned face.* Oh Shane, I didn't mean that. *His head drops and he turns to walk away.* I'm sorry, Shane. I'm so

sorry. It's not just that. It's ever'thing. The house and yard are embarrassing, the church is berserk with Holt Hightower and all those doomsday crazies, I'm worried about you all the time, every day o' my life because I don't trust what these politicians say, and—
Tears fill her eyes. —I miss Mom so much. I hate my life and I hate myself! *When she bursts into tears and he leans over to hold her, she does not resist.*

SHANE, *tenderly*: I'm sorry too, Em. I miss her too. Bad. And—I get so homesick sometimes over there I can hardly stand it.

EMILY, *pulling back and looking him in the eye, hers glistening*: Oh Shane, I think these politicians are lyin' to us. You know they won't even show the coffins of our soldiers and Marines when they arrive home? And why are we stayin' over there—why are you havin' to stay—when we already got rid o' that wretched Saddam Hussein?

SHANE: Well, Em, we ain't found 'im yet. And we ain't found all the weapons o' mass destruction and biological and chemical warfare they had. We ain't found any o' those and we know they're there.

EMILY, *with sadness, gently stroking his face with her hand*: Oh Shane.

SHANE: What? *Beat.* Are folks turnin' against the war?

EMILY: No, least none of our friends, our church, our school, anybody. They're more for it'n ever. *She looks tenderly into his eyes.* Oh, I'm so proud of you, Shane.

SHANE, *his eyes brightening*: They said Mr. Hightower got on Sean Hannity's show, and tole him 'bout me and Josh, and Sean said Mr. Hightower was a great American, but Josh and me made it safe for great Americans to live.

EMILY, *nodding*: I heard. But . . .

SHANE: What? *He notices her biting her lip, perhaps debating whether to tell him something, or maybe to keep from crying, or maybe both.* Are you okay, Emily?

Just then, her cell phone rings on the table next to her. She grabs it and sees the number.

EMILY, *exasperated*: Oh Lord.

SHANE: Who is it? *When she shakes her head in irritation, he grabs the phone and looks.* Why it's Sharmonique again. *He shoves it toward her.* Answer it. *He sees her jaw jut out.* You never even called her back did you? Quit feelin' sorry fer yourself. Answer it!

EMILY, *speaking into the cell*: Hi Sharmonique. *Pause.* Yes, I—I apologize for not callin' you back yet, Sharmonique. I got hur— *She glances at Shane.* —I'm sorry, I don't have any excuse. I should have called you by now. *Pause.* Oh thank you, uh,

yes—I appreciate your forgiveness, Sharmonique. *She looks at Shane again, her face a tumult of emotions—shame, gratitude, and tears welling up in her eye as her throat tightens.* Will—would you forgive me if I can try to make it up to you, Sharmonique?

SHARMONIQUE, *off stage, her answer so loud and thrilled that we can hear it:* Oh yes, Emily!

EMILY, *half laughing, half crying:* Okay, is your mom there? *Beat.* She's asleep? *Beat.* Well when she wakes up, could you ask her if it's alright if I come take you out Saturday for a movie and somethin' to eat? *Pause.* *She glances up at Shane, her chin and voice quivering through her smile.* Yes, I know, my mom used to do that. Oh Sharmonique, don't cry, honey, it's okay. You won't be alone any more. *Pause.* You don't know where your mom is and you haven't seen her since yesterday? Okay, I'm gonna come down there right now and pick you up and we'll go out and get somethin' to eat, okay? *Pause.* Okay, honey. I'll be there in about—an hour or a little more. *She looks up at Shane.* I—I love you too, Sharmonique. See you in a little while.

Emily closes the phone and lays it down.

SHANE: Well—that's great, sis, but—how the heck you gonna get down there to West Dallas? You can't drive with that honkin' cast on your leg.

EMILY, *scrambling to rise:* You're gonna take me, big brother, the one they always brag about in church and school an' ever'where else. *Getting to her feet, she grabs her crutches, positions them under her arms, and bumps Shane out of the way as she heads for the door.* And thank you for using “heck” and “honkin'” ‘stead o' some o' the other adjectives and adverbs you taken a shine to since you learned all that military discipline.

SHANE: But I can't—

EMILY, *turning toward him, her eyes blazing:* Oh yes you can, buddy. You got me into this. Now you're gonna help, least this once.

SHANE, *rushing from the room:* Okay, okay! Just let me get somethin' to take with me from the kitchen. I'm thirsty and starved.

EMILY, *hobbling to the door, then stopping and speaking aloud to herself.* She was hardly with anyone before, 'cept Mom, her own crackhead mom's thirteen years older'n her. *She bows her head in shame.* And I never once even tried to call her after Mom died, even though she made me promise to look after her. *She totters for a moment on her crutches, nearly overcome with grief.* How many sorrows can a sixteen-year-old know?

DAISY, *off stage:* Not as many as that shattered little ten-year-old.

EMILY, *her head jerking up*: What? *She looks around to protest. After a moment, she looks slowly upward and speaks softly.* Okay, Mom, or little voice in my head or God, or whatever you are. You always said if your own problems were draggin' you down, put your shoulders under someone else's and watch how fast yours fled away. *She smiles and nods her head.* Alright, Mom, I believe you.

SHANE, *rushing back into the room with a soft drink and a banana, and past Emily to open the door for her.* Alright, let's go.

She hobbles through the door on her crutches, and he shuts it behind her.

DAISY, *off stage, with joy*: So excitin' she's beginnin' to understand how true are those words, and to know she'll teach 'em to her own children and theirs too.

ACT V

Scene Four

Rankin home, night. Emily sits at the dining table, still wearing the leg cast.

EMILY: How naïve I was to think we had turned a corner. Nearly three o'clock and still he's out with his buddies. I wonder who it is this time? Josh Hightower's back in Iraq for his next tour, and good riddance. Colt Shahan seems to have straightened out. I don't even think he drinks any more—odd for a Presbyterian boy. His black buddy Jasper in Dallas from his platoon is straight as an arrow and an ordained Baptist minister. Maybe it's Rodriguez—the guy from Abilene—the other Texas guy in his platoon that smells like a beer brewery every time I see him. Shane was so sweet to Sharmonique the other night when we took her out to eat, and now here he is, out all night again, and only a couple weeks before his furlough's over. It hardly seems a week since he got home. I feel—cheated. *She picks up the framed photo of Daisy.* And I feel so ashamed to be deceivin' him about my true feelin's, Mom—about your feelin's—but I'd be more ashamed if I made him question my support or the rightness of his own course. No, he needs to know we're behind him—that I'm behind him. *She swells with pride.* After all, he is servin' his country—our country. He is exactly what we have been taught our whole lives is a hero. *She lays Daisy's photo down on her lap and her gaze drifts.* But—*Beat.* —What if it *is* wrong, what if he's bein' used for—bad ends—by bad people? Oh, I shouldn't have to worry about such things, I am only sixteen!

Just then, she hears the front door open and Shane comes in. He wears a black wifebeater shirt and has "U.S.M.C." tattooed on one bicep. He stumbles a bit, then straightens his walk as he goes to the couch. He pulls a military-issue Colt .45 out of a pocket, lays it on an end table, and lays down. Emily watches. After a minute, he gets up, opens a nearby window, then falls back onto the couch. He is sleeping and breathing heavily within seconds.

EMILY: And of course Dad is out of town at another pastors' conference. *She sighs.*

After a moment, Shane unleashes a long, piercing shriek, though he appears still asleep. Emily sits stunned for a moment. Then she climbs to her feet, grabs one crutch, puts it under the arm on the side of her good leg, and hobbles across the room to the couch. As she does, Shane sits up, his feet on the floor, and stares straight ahead. He sports a skull and crossbones on his other tricep.

EMILY, *breathless, her voice quavering*: Shane? *He continues staring straight ahead, his eyes appear focused on something outside of the room. She steps even closer.* Shane?

SHANE: *turning and looking at her*: What is it?

EMILY: Are you alright?

SHANE: Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright.

EMILY, *glancing at the open window*: Why did you open that window at night in the middle o' winter? *She peers at him.* Shane, you're—are you sweating? *She steps back a half-step.* Oh my gosh, this couch is drenched with sweat!

SHANE: No. *He notices the draft from the open window.* Hey, close that winda, will ya, Em? I'm freezin'.

She hobbles to the window, closes it, then goes back to him, bends over and cradles his head in her arms.

EMILY, *spooked, still hugging him*: You're soakin' wet, but you have no fever. *Pause.* I've missed you so much, Shane.

SHANE: Yeah, me too.

She sees his Colt on the end table. She reaches out a hand and touches it.

EMILY, *evenly*: Shane, what's wrong?

SHANE, *leaning away from her, laying back onto the couch, and closing his eyes*: Nothin', goo'night Em.

Emily stares at him for a moment, wipes his sweaty moisture from her arms onto her shirt, then hobbles back to the dining table.

EMILY: Who is that?

ACT V

Scene Five

Church, just after the close of the Sunday morning service. Emily hobbles from her seat with one crutch, though without her cast, young SHARMONIQUE PARKER with her. Jake and Holt visit with Rog, Tommy, Maggie, and Mary Ann near the pulpit. Tommy pokes Rog playfully in the stomach and the whole group laughs, then Jake places his hand on Rog's shoulder and speaks to him. Amy walks just behind Kylie.

SHARMONIQUE: Emily, I need to go to the bathroom.

EMILY: Sure, let's—

SHARMONIQUE: That's okay, I know the way. I go there the same time every week. *She hurries proudly LS.*

AMY: Emily, do you see how much more slender and healthy Sharmonique looks since she's been comin' to church with you? She's dressin' so nice.

EMILY, *pausing to watch Sharmonique exit*: She may be helpin' me more than I'm helpin' her.

AMY: What do you mean?

EMILY: Amy, you played so good last night. *Amy lowers her head.* No really, you played great. Gosh, just four points from beatin' Fort Worth Christian and goin' to the state championship.

AMY, *after a beat*: We just couldn't beat 'em again, either time, without you. *Now Emily lowers her head.* Even with—

EMILY, *looking back up*: Even with Kylie's twenty eight points and nineteen rebounds?

AMY, *looking back up*: Yeah, even with that. But Em, remember—

EMILY, *laughing*: I know, I know, like my mom said, "All things work together—"

AMY, *joining her*, and EMILY: "—for the good of those who love God and are the called according to His purpose."

AMY: I saw you and Coach Callahan talkin' in the locker room after the game. *Emily says nothing.* So—what did he say? *Emily looks around as though hoping for someone to intervene, but no one does.* Come on, Em. What?

EMILY, *sighing*: He said he knew I'd been through a lot. *Beat.* But—he said he was just sorry for my sake and—the rest o' y'all—that I couldn't've stuck with y'all. *Beat.* You know, Amy, I only went to two of your—our—games the whole season after I got hurt, and no practices. Y'all and Coach both have to think I was just in it for myself and not the team. But I—

AMY: No—

EMILY: He said it—it might've helped me get my focus off my own troubles some. *Hot tears fill her eyes and her chin starts to quiver.*

AMY: Is—that all he said?

EMILY, *after a pause*: He said he'd start givin' me a lift to rehab my knee the days he could and he wanted to map out a game plan for gettin' me ready for next season.

AMY: See, I told ya, Em—he *does* want you back next year!

EMILY, *looking up at her through tears and a half-smile*: He said next year starts tomorrow.

AMY, *reaching forward and pulling Emily to her in a passionate hug*: Oh he knows what all you been through, Em, with your mom and Shane and now your knee. *They hug for a minute, then Amy pulls back.* Didn't I see Coach talkin' to Sharmonique? *Emily nods.* What did he say? *Emily looks down again and says nothing.* Come on, Em—what did he say?

EMILY, *still looking down, choking back tears*: He told her I'm the bravest player he's ever coached, and that he's been coachin' since before she was born.

AMY, *her own eyes misting up*: Oh Emily.

EMILY, *looking back up, her wet eyes flashing*: But Amy—it's so not true. It's absolutely not true. I wouldn't even've been in the building with y'all last night if Shane hadn't chastised me so about it, sayin' gettin' hurt and quittin' the team were two different things. *Pause.* And Sharmonique wouldn'ta been with me either if it wasn't for Shane.

AMY, *looking off toward RS*: Well there's somebody you might get an argument from on that.

EMILY, *turning, looking the same direction, and smiling*: Sharmonique.

AMY: Such a beautiful smile she's got, Em. She thinks she's the queen o' the world now—'cause o' you.

EMILY, *turning back to Amy*: Better go get her, Dad's takin' us out to eat. *Beat.* Thanks, Amy.

AMY: Hey, my intentions are purely selfish—I want to win a state championship next year and we need you back on the team to do it!

EMILY: Haha. *She laughs and turns to move with her crutch, toward RS.*

Kylie—sporting a short, tight, low-cut dress, high stilettos, and a generous dose of makeup, all of which accentuate her tall, shapely beauty—walks toward Emily from US and they nearly collide. They stare at one another for a moment, then contempt twists Kylie’s face.

KYLIE, *barely more than a whisper, but with enough venom to echo across mountains:* You’re pathetic.

She struts past Emily—who, a moment before beaming, now stands stricken—and off LS. Just as tears fill Emily’s eyes again and she lowers her head in choking despair, Sharmonique rushes to her and hugs her around her waist.

SHARMONIQUE: Are we still going to eat wherever I want?

EMILY, *clearing her throat, speaking softly:* Yes, Sharm—wherever you want.

SHARMONIQUE: I think I want to go to a place that has spaghetti and milk shakes and chocolate brownies. *She looks up at Emily.* Do you know a place like that?

EMILY: Yes, sugar. It may be two places, but we’re gonna go there.

SHARMONIQUE, *pulling away and heading for the door:* Yes!

EMILY, *hobbling behind on her crutch, shaking her head, then looking up at the ceiling:* I have no idea what You think You can do with someone like me, but I guess You can’t get rid o’ me now.

ACT V

Scene Six

Rankin home, day. Jake, Emily, Shane, and Rog sit around the table. They have just finished eating.

JAKE: Love that Mr. Jim’s pizza.

EMILY: Did you get enough, Rog?

ROG, *holding his stomach and grimacing in mock pain:* Please, I am about ready to—“expand,” is it?

JAKE, *laughing, grabbing his mid-section:* Ha ha, well I have the same problem as you, then, son.

EMILY: Do you mean “explode,” Rog?

ROG: Yes, yes, explode! I am going to explode from eating too much pizza!

EMILY: You know, Rog, this may be the first time I’ve ever seen you laugh.

JAKE: Good grief, Emily, try not to embarrass our guest.

EMILY: Dad—I wasn’t trying to embarrass him.

ROG, *with mirth*: No problem, Pastor Rankin, I know Emily by now—and her sense of humor.

EMILY, *in mock anger*: Well thanks a lot, Rog!

JAKE: Rog, I’m sorry it’s taken us so long to have ya over for supper, but we’re glad you came an’ it’s been great gettin’ to know ya a little better. I guess a lot o’ folks ask ya what life was like back in Iraq?

ROG, *pausing, then putting down his fork*: Saddam’s Iraq was not a good place for the Shia, which our people are. My father was threatened, my mother insulted, and my older brother beaten. My uncle and cousin died in the war against Iran in the ‘80s, when Saddam forced us to fight our own people.

JAKE: Your “own people” being the Shiites in Iran.

ROG: That is right.

JAKE: So how do you like America?

ROG: It is— *He glances around the table, catches Emily’s glinting eyes, then chuckles as he answers.* —different.

Everyone at the table laughs.

EMILY: Well, we’re glad you’re here—even though you insulted me.

JAKE: So—I guess you’re glad America’s fightin’ over there?

ROG: Yes, I am very thankful for the sacrifice your country is making to rid us of that murderous dictator, and to help us be free. *Beat.* What do you think?

JAKE: Well, I think all of us, an’ just about ever’one we know, would agree.

EMILY: Well not ever’one we know, Dad.

JAKE: What do you mean?

EMILY: The Shahans, Dad. And the Risingers in our own church—I'm not sure what they think.

JAKE, *looking at Rog*: Sam Shahan is a dear friend of mine. He pastors a conservative Presbyterian church in the area. His son Colt was the quarterback on Shane's high school football team. *He addresses all three of them.* I'm not sure how Sam took this—diff'erent—path on this one issue. He's very solid on most other things.

EMILY: Colt's totally against it.

JAKE: How do you know that?

EMILY: He told me, Dad, when he was home over Christmas.

JAKE, *to Shane*: That true?

SHANE, *shrugging*: I only saw him once, for a minute, and we didn't talk about the war.

JAKE: Hmm.

SHANE, *chuckling*: Guess that "liberal bastion" o' Austin he joked about when he went off to college sorta rubbed off on him.

EMILY: Good grief. He's in a great church and campus ministry and he's quit drinkin'—*She glances at Shane.* —so it's not like he's quit believin' in God. But he does hate Bush. *Pause.* Uh, I mean he's not a fan.

JAKE, *shaking his head, perplexed*: I can understand, you know, a liberal or a pagan bein' against the war. But Christians? Includin' the pastor of an evangelical church? It's just a mystery to me. Why do you think he feels that way, Em?

She says nothing and drinks water from her glass.

JAKE: Well?

EMILY, *glancing around the table*: Well, he said he thinks attackin' Iraq is one o' the biggest mistakes in the history of this country, that every reason we gave was a lie, and it amazes him how all these Christians could be leadin' the charge to drench the world in blood—those are his words of course. He said we need to trade in our M-16s for some John 3:16. *They all stare at her.* To take to the Arabs, I mean. The Moslems.

SHANE, *breaking into laughter*: What the hell—heck—got into him, Dad?

ROG: It's okay, I take no offense. I asked for an honest answer. I have found many others feel the same way, if not in the churches.

EMILY, *staring right at Jake*: Yeah, some people you wouldn't— *She stops in mid-sentence as the others look at her. She turns to Shane.* —Come on, I wanna show Rog how I can school you in Horse.

SHANE: Horse? You mean shootin' baskets?

EMILY: Yeah, out on the driveway, just like I used to do when I was in junior high and it made you so mad.

JAKE: Emily, you just got that cast off your leg. You can't even walk without that crutch yet.

EMILY, *her eyes merry*: Since when did I need two good legs to beat Shane in any kind o' shootin' contest, Daddy?

SHANE, *rising from his chair*: Don't worry, Dad, I'll catch her if she starts to fall down as she's air ballin'.

EMILY: Oh my gosh!

JAKE: Alright, but for goodness sakes, be careful, Em.

As Shane jostles Emily on their way out and Emily swings her crutch at him, Rog rises from his own chair.

ROG: Thank you, Pastor Rankin—for the pizza and for making me feel so welcome at the church. It has been a big help to me.

JAKE, *rising from his chair*: Aw, no problem, Rog. It's a privilege to have a fine young man like you from such a brave family to be a part of us. Plus, people like you is what built this country. We're better with you here, though it's too bad Iraq is losin' good folks like you an' your family. *Pause.* Say Rog, I know your background was not Christian, but—well that Pastor Shahan friend o' mine, he claims Iraq has quite a few Christians, but that a lot of 'em are leavin', or tryin' to leave, now. Is that true?

ROG: It is true that Iraq had, I have heard, seven or eight hundred thousand Christians before the war, and that many are now leaving.

JAKE: But why on earth, with us there now to protect 'em?

ROG, *hesitant*: Uh—Saddam Hussein, for all his many serious faults, did not allow one group to attack another, or he would punish the attacker.

JAKE: I guess if there was any attackin' to be done, he'd do it.

ROG: Yes, right. So life in Iraq was quite safe for Christians as long as they obeyed our country's laws and did not—how you say, agi—

JAKE: Agitate?

ROG: Yes, agitate against Moslem social practices. Now, however, many Iraqis consider the Christians as—collabora-tors—with what they consider the Crusaders and Zionists, and so they make life hard for them. Others of the more—fundamental—sort, do not appreciate Christians selling liquor and cigarettes in their stores and Christian women dressing—uh, i—im—

JAKE: Immodestly?

ROG: Yes, immodestly, thank you, sir.

JAKE: So it's true, then—some Christians are leaving Iraq.

ROG: I believe that many—thousands—have left.

JAKE, *slowly shaking his head*: Incredible. Of all the times to leave, when they are finally free. And is it true that some churches have been attacked?

ROG: Yes, several I know of, mostly bombed.

JAKE: Goodness. Not by Americans?

ROG: No, but *because* of the Americans—at least that is what the attackers would claim.

Jake ponders that, then lays a hand on Rog's shoulder.

JAKE: I am sorry about all that, but I cannot say I am sorry that it brought you here.

ROG, *staring at him, thoughtfully*: Thank you, Pastor Rankin.

JAKE: Say, why don't you go give Shane a hand out there against Emily? He may need it by now. I'm gonna see if I can track down some chocolate cake I saw around here the other day.

ROG, *turning to walk out*: Yes, sir.

After Rog leaves, Jake gathers empty pizza boxes, plates, and cups, and puts them into a trash can. Then Emily screams from outside. Jake whirls toward the sound. He hears what sounds like a vicious dog attacking, as well as Shane's voice shouting. When Emily shrieks more loudly, Jake races out of the house.

EMILY, *off stage, as the dog noise continues*: Shane! Shane!

ACT VI

Scene One

Rankin home, night. Emily and Rog sit at the dining room table. Jake enters US, presumably from Shane's room, and joins them. They all sit for a moment without speaking, shaken.

ROG: The doctor said he'll be alright?

JAKE: Yes, though he'll have to take a series of Rabies shots.

EMILY: How many stitches did he get?

JAKE: Seventy four.

Emily gasps. For a moment no one says anything.

EMILY: We should sue the Slades for letting that scum of a beast loose. They should never even have owned a pit bull.

JAKE: He never gave anyone trouble before, honey, an' they had him penned up good. Evidently a rabid mountain lion came in from those hills behind their place an' bit the dog. They never even knew it. Sheriff Flanagan tracked down the cougar'n killed it himself.

ROG: I think Shane saved my life. *Emily and Jake stare at him.* That beast attacked me first and Shane tackled him like in American football. Shane is big and strong, but that beast nearly killed him. It bit him all over, even his neck. *He looks at Emily and half-smiles.* If Emily had not been beating on the dog with that shovel— *He turns to Jake.* — and if you had not shot it with your pistol—many times—Shane might have died. How could you be sure you would hit the beast and not Shane?

EMILY: You kiddin'? Daddy's been shootin' since he was a little boy. He taught us how when we were little too. Besides, Shane did alright for himself. He bit that dog's ear off and was about to break his neck when Daddy shot him.

ROG: There was nothing left of that dog's head. *Beat.* Almost as many Texans carry guns as Iraqis. *He sighs, reflective and troubled, then stands and walks away.* It is true, he saved my life.

ACT VI

Scene Two

Rankin home, day. Emily limps in from school, puts down her book bag, and plops down at the dining room table with a groan.

EMILY, *rubbing her knee*: Oh gosh. That blasted rehab is gonna kill me before it cures me. *She leans back, closes her eyes, and breathes for a moment. Then she grabs the laptop from nearby and begins to type, speaking aloud.* Good old Amy, disciplin' me, and I'm supposed to be the pastor's daughter. Encouragin' me to be patient and forgivin' with Kylie Hightower. *She reads Amy's words aloud.* "We both know she may not even be a believer, and your last note to me about her seemed a bit harsh. I just don't want you to become like she is." Wow. That stings. *She types some more.* Think I'm gonna find the note I sent Amy that she's talkin' about, but first I'm gonna find Kylie's Xanga web page posting that caused me to write it. *She clicks some more.* History. *More clicks, then her head pops back in surprise.* What—"Grrl—G-R-R-L— of My Dreamz," ending with a "z." That's strange. *She clicks some more, then blinks and gasps in shock. She quickly clicks a couple more times, then stares off into space, stunned. After a moment, she looks back to the laptop screen and types some more, again speaking aloud.* History. *Pause.* Oh Lord God. *Tears fill her eyes as she continues to click and speak aloud.* "Soldiers and Their Bitches." "Captured and Raped." "Your Pain Is My Pleasure." *Tears streaming down her cheeks, gasping, she turns off the computer and staggers to the couch and falls on it. She lays there, staring into space as the stage goes dark*

EMILY, *off stage, in stunned bewilderment*: Mom is gone and now Shane is going too. *Pause.* Mama.

The stage remains dark and silent for a moment and the background screen of day transitions to night, indicating the passage of time.

JAKE, *off stage*: Emily? It's time for the Wednesday evening service. Emily—what's wrong?

As Jake turns the lights back up, Emily remains on the couch, now curled up in the fetal position and cradling Daisy's diary. Jake walks into the room, leans over her, then sits down on the couch next to her.

JAKE: What is it, honey? *A long pause as Emily stares, dazed, into space. He holds her to himself, as he not done in a long time. Another moment passes. I—I need to get to the Wednesday night service, Emmy. He kisses her on the forehead, rises, and turns to walk away. Something stops him. He turns back to her, ponders the situation, then pulls out his cell phone, dials, and puts it to his ear. Tim? Beat. Hey, I know it's not much notice, but can you preach tonight? Beat. Yeh, that'd be perfect, and you already have it prepared. Pause. I thought we could go, but we're both under the weather. Pause. Yeah, prayer'd be greatly appreciated. Thanks, buddy. We'll pray for you too. He puts the phone back in his pocket and sits back down with Emily, then begins gently stroking her hair.*

EMILY, *softly, after another pause*: Daddy, what's wrong with Shane?

JAKE, *wincing, after a long pause*: I don't know, honey. Why do you ask that?

EMILY: I saw—awful things on my computer. And they were from times he was the only one here.

JAKE, *tense, conviction creasing his face, after yet another pause*: Such things—are a temptation for many—if not most—young men—and even older men. *For the first time, she turns her gaze to him.* I found him kickin' and beatin' Poppy half to death when I came home the other night.

EMILY, *staring at him*: Poppy? But—he raised Poppy from a puppy.

JAKE: I thought maybe the medication from his injuries might have spurred it, but he finished those two days before. *Pause.* I—I'm afraid for him. And I'm more afraid for him that he is going back—there.

EMILY: He never did these things before. Did he?

JAKE: He had his temptations. He is a sinner. But—he resisted.

EMILY, *whispering, now pulling her ancient stuffed bear to herself, her eyes again glassy and looking away from Jake.* And the devil fled from him.

ACT VI

Scene Three

Rankin home, early evening. A crowd has gathered for Shane's end-of-furlough party. A makeshift banner reads, WE LOVE YOU SHANE! Jake, Holt, his wife Maggie, Amy, Tommy, Mary Ann, Rog, Sharmonique, even Kylie mingle in loud, raucous fashion, though we don't see Shane. Emily sits back in the recliner, her leg up on the ottoman, a large ice pack covering her knee.

JAKE, *to Holt and Maggie*: That body armor was a great gift y'all got Shane.

HOLT: Aw, ever'one kicked in some on it, Jake. Good to see Shane recovered from his injuries. How ironic—symbolic even—your brave boy risks his life even here to save an Iraqi boy. You won't see the liberal media reportin' that kinda story. Now if Shane'd tried to kill Rog 'stead o' savin' him, they'da been all over that one.

MAGGIE, *to Jake*: Maybe you heard some our boys're havin' a hard time gettin' body armor to help protect 'em over yonder in Iraq? Least two Texas boys we know personally waited for months on armor their comp'ny commander already ordered for 'em, then got tore up by roadside bombs when they wouldn't o' had a scratch with the right armor! Holt says it seems some o' the companies s'posed to supply it're

backlogged and havin' all sorts o' headaches with it and what-not—so he just set about seein' if Pantheon might could come up with somethin' a little quicker.

HOLT: Pitiful. Danged gov'ment dudn't know their rears from a hole in the ground.

MAGGIE, *leaning closer to Jake*: Maybe it'll help Shane remember that the Bible says he has a friend who is closer than a brother, but with this armor, we'll be almost as close to him as that.

Tommy walks to Emily.

EMILY: Tommy, I didn't even see you, the place was so crowded.

TOMMY: Aw yeah. I just stayed kinda back in the corner. You know, it was Shane's night.

EMILY: It's always Shane's night. When have you ever had a night, Tommy O'Rourke?

TOMMY, *looking down and shifting his weight from foot to foot*: I'm sorry your knee's hurtin' again, Emily.

EMILY: Tommy, you remember when I kicked you in *your* knee when I was in second grade and you were in third and all the boys called you a sissy 'cause you wouldn't do nothin' back to me or tell on me neither?

Gradually, everyone else exits the stage, except for Jake, who walks DS. He sits in front of the computer and retrieves Daisy's diary from nearby, sits down, and opens it to read.

TOMMY, *looking down, embarrassed*: Oh, yeah. Gosh, how did you remember that?"

EMILY: Well, you were probably the only boy in the school who wouldn't have kicked me back, and twice as hard. *Beat*. Tommy—could you ask Shane to come here a minute? I need to ask him somethin'.

TOMMY: Oh, I saw him leave a few minutes ago out the back with Heath and some of 'em.

EMILY, *crestfallen*: He left already?

TOMMY: Sorry, Emily, I thought you knew.

For a minute, Emily stares into space. Then she looks at Tommy again.

EMILY: An hour late to his own goin' away party, then the first one to leave, 'thout sayin' a word to his sister. Oh well. I'm glad you're here, Tommy.

TOMMY: Thanks, Emily. Uh, I just wanted to let you know I signed up with the Marines, and I report to Camp Pendleton two weeks after school's out in May. They practically guaranteed me I'd get to go to Iraq. And Emily? *He speaks with conviction, not noticing the announcement has struck her dumb.* Shane's the reason I did it. Hurt like he was, and still with the chance to maybe play college ball, and so many other things a guy like him could do. But—he joined up to go fight for us, when it's guys like him *we* should be fightin' for. It just inspired me, Emily. He's just like Pat Tillman, that All-Pro football player who joined the Rangers.

EMILY, *looking away, wanting to run away, tears filling her eyes, gasping softly:* Pat Tillman's his hero.

TOMMY: You okay, Emily?

EMILY, *looking back to him, forcing a smile, and quickly wiping away the tears overflowing her eyes:* Sure, yes, Tommy. I'm very proud of you, Tommy. You're—a special boy. You've always been a special boy. *Her voice cracks and she winces and reaches to rub her knee.*

TOMMY: Does it hurt bad?

EMILY: Think it may be more than overdoin' it at rehab without Coach Callahan today. Anyhow, my mom told me my Grandma Clanton used to write letters to the boys she went to high school with when they went to the Pacific to fight the Japanese in World War II, and they'd write her back, just as friends. Well, my dad doesn't let me send private e-mails to boys, but how about if we post messages on our Xangas to each other when you leave? We can make each other subscribers so just our good friends'll see our posts. I send Shane lots o' e-mails when he's over there.

TOMMY: Wow, that'd be great, Emily. You'd do that with me?

EMILY: Of course. Why wouldn't I?

TOMMY, *looking down again:* Aw, I don't know. I guess I've just always thought of you as—you know, on a higher level'n the rest of us.

EMILY: Why that's a horrible thing to say, Tommy O'Rourke! Here, give me a hug. *She leans up from the recliner and reaches one arm around him for a sideways squeeze.* Goodness—higher level! *Pause.* What's your mom think about it?

TOMMY: Oh, she's pretty excited. A little scared, but she's braggin' to ever'body at church and around the neighborhood. Grandpa—her dad—he was a Marine in World War II. He left all his medals to me when he died. Guess you might say he's—well, I always looked up to 'im. Well, I better go. Thanks for bein' so nice, Emily.

EMILY, *drawing in her breath, then reaching her hand up to shake his*: E-mail me, Tommy—immediately, you hear?

TOMMY: I hear. *Beat*. Well alright then.

He cants his head, then turns and leaves stage left. She watches after him.

EMILY, *aloud to herself*: There's so many things I want to say to you, Tommy O'Rourke, but I guess now's not the time. I'll just e-mail 'em to ya later. Oh your poor mother, raisin' five kids without your dad, him movin' in with that young "Administrative Assistant" after twenty-two years o' marriage. Oh Tommy, and you're the oldest and best and she loves you so much. *Beat*. You're the best o' *all* of us. *She sighs, then slowly rises from the recliner, grunting in pain and barely able to put any weight on her sore knee. She limps DS to Jake.* Dad?

JAKE, *not turning away from the screen, his voice hollow*: Did you know Mom wrote all this about the war?

EMILY, *in the adolescent fashion of the day*: Well ya-oww. You didn't?

JAKE, *his eyes remaining glued to the screen as he scrolls down*: These people on the websites she read, these aren't liberals. *He turns around toward her.* How come I didn't know about these people?

EMILY, *sitting down nearby*: You mean none of 'em have been on Sean Hannity?

JAKE, *turning red, then lifting the diary and looking at it*. I just don't understand it. The sickness, the pain, the medicines—she— *His eyes, uncertain, meet Emily's.*

EMILY: She what, dad?

JAKE, *flustered*: Well—she changed toward the end. A lot. *She just stares at him.* Her— *He doesn't want to say it, but Emily has been waiting a long time for him to.* I guess her—mind—was just—confused there toward the end. *His final words are little more than a whisper.*

EMILY, *her voice hard but level*: Her mind was just fine till the very end, Dad, and you know it. In fact, I think her mind was never any better than it was right at the end.

JAKE, *bewildered*: But—she—she couldn't have been right, Emmy. Shane—

EMILY: Shane? *She leans forward, gripping her pounding knee with one hand.* What about my big brother, Daddy? Are you going to use him as an example of how right this war is? How good it is for our country? Let's talk to him about it a little bit and get a reading. Oh that's right—he's not here, is he? I wonder where he is right now, Dad? One good thing is, unlike some other nights, he has to come home sometime tonight,

because he flies out on a plane in about eight hours to head back, to head back—there. *Something stops her, and she leans back, mute and staring into space.*

JAKE, *alarmed and getting to his feet*: What is it, Emmy?

EMILY, *quietly stricken*: He has to leave here at 4:30 in the morning, and I don't know if I can even wake up to see him by then with the medication I'm on. *She jerks up and thrusts a finger at him.* You better wake me up to say goodbye to him, Daddy. We won't see him for seven more months!

ACT VI

Scene Four

Rankin home, later that night. All is silent and all is dark except for one dim light. After a moment a person stealthily enters the house from US. We can just make out that it is Shane. He grabs a rucksack, glances around for just a couple of seconds, then creeps US, out of the house, and off the stage without saying a word to anyone.

ACT VII

Scene One

Rankin home, day. Jake and Holt sip coffee and visit again.

JAKE: Abu what?

HOLT: Abu Grahib. *He pronounces the second word "Grabe."* I like how Seamus Houlihan says it, though: Abu "Grab." *He laughs heartily.*

JAKE: Abu "Grab"? I don't get it.

HOLT: Aw, it's a prison o' ours on the outskirts o' Baghdad. Liberal rag "New York Times" says we been abusin' Iraqi "prisoners o' war," so called, there.

JAKE: Really? I been at that Dallas-Fort Worth Christians fer Israel meetin' last couple o' days and been out o' the loop.

HOLT, *his anger building*: Typical left-wing, bleedin'-heart hogwash. Only, when you're in a war, that kinda crap'll get people killed—*are* people. God dangit, Jake, I can't believe even the liberals would go this far, to not just promote our enemy's slanders, but create it themselves! Ask me, they gone from bein' unpatriotic to bein' traitors. They're stickin' a knife in ever' American soldier and Marine's back and twistin' it—'cludin' Josh and Shane.

JAKE: Do you think it's—uh, any of it's—true?

HOLT: What? Good grief, Jake, I'm sure Abu Grab ain't no five-star hotel, but you want it to be? You know who we got in there, buddy? Cowards, sick bastards—'scuse my French, Jake—and screw the French too, lousy spineless curs—murderin' cowards that'll shoot, blow up, cut, slice, an' if possible, torture to death are sons, an' any other American they can get their hands on—'cludin' Emily. *Jake nods in agreement.* But're we doin' what these Commy newspaper whimps say we're doin'—*female* soldiers puttin' nekkid prisoners on leashes an' makin' em crawl an' roll around on the ground an' bark like dogs? Threatenin' 'em with real dogs an' 'lectric shock? Pilin' 'em naked on top each other? Beatin' 'em, torturin' 'em, nearly drownin' 'em—some of 'em to death? One guy found literally on ice? No, Jake Rankin, American soldiers wouldn't do that, an' American officers wouldn't let 'em if they wanted to. We're not like the ter'rists—we got a rule o' law we folla.

JAKE: You're right, no way that sorta stuff—

HOLT, *leaning across the table toward him*: And Jake—this president ours wouldn't allow it to happen if they did. By gosh, I know the man—Maggie was sorority sisters at SMU with his wife—we spent the night twicest in the Lincoln Bedroom, as you know. Such things would not take place under this man's watch in the White House! *He looks at his watch, then hurries up from his chair.* Sorry, Jake, gotta go. S'posed to pick up that fancy sheik an' his towel-head brother at the airport tonight.

JAKE: Oh, the ones from the United Kingdom of Arab—

HOLT: Yeah, that's the one, an' they promised they'll stand with us fer Israel if we give 'em the firepower—the Pantheon firepower—and bucks to do it—plus it'll help 'em hannel their own little pesky breakaway province, the Dingdong kingdom of the Doodah or whatever. Guess it just shows not all Arabs are scum.

JAKE: You know, the Moslems moved into that old church buildin' right down the road from us. Really think we oughta reach out to 'em. They need the gospel much as anyone. More'n most.

Holt stops just shy of the door, turns to Jake, then takes a couple of steps back toward him.

HOLT: You know, buddy, I always admired you for preachin' to us how we need to share the gospel with ever' livin' thing. But I think doin' it with a bunch o' Moslems movin' into a former church in are own neighborhood—well I gotta say, Jake, don't ya think that's maybe carryin' it just a little too far? See ya, buddy.

Holt leaves US and Jake ponders that for a moment, then returns to his seat at the table. He seems agitated.

JAKE, *alone but speaking aloud*: Craziest thing ever heard. Dogs, electric shock. Surely not. Shoot, though, how would I know? *Pause.* It all makes so much sense when

Holt says it. And when Seamus Houlihan explains it. But—that danged diary. I need to go read some more of it, but I'm afraid what I might find next. Besides, what would I do about all this if I did know the truth? *He sighs deeply.* That's what happens when I don't listen to Seamus fer a few days—I git confused. But that's the only time I have to do what I used to do, startin' even 'fore I met Daisy—an' right before I sensed— *He looks upward.* –You're leadin' to go to seminary. *Beat.* Beginnin' ever' day alone with my Bible, my prayers, an' You, Lord. What's wrong with me? Pastorin' a church that's nearin' two thousand souls—again—for nearly twenty years an' I average less'n five minutes a day in prayer! How can I expect anything good—fer the church, fer Emily, fer me to have wisdom at church an'—in my own thought life, God hep me—fer the war to end, fer Shane to grow in his faith and not lose it—fer him to git home safe—with so pitiful a practice?

Greatly troubled, he goes to his knees on the floor, closes his eyes, folds his hands together, and bows his head in prayer.

JAKE: Lord—please. Hep me to have a—an uncommon wisdom an' discernment, the ability to see past those things that're obvious an' to those that're not. *Pause.* To see an' understand the deep an' weighty matters o' Yours that we modern Christians seem to miss like ever'one else. *Pause.* *His voice loses volume and gradually goes hollow.* Even—even if it proves a hard road to go, since not many'll be interested in goin' that way. O Jesus, hep me. Amen. *He rises slowly, turns, and looks out a window.* Think that last part'll be the biggest battle, an' the biggest consequences—fer good or evil.

ACT VII

Scene Two

Rankin home, night. Emily sits at the computer, webcasting with Shane. His image is not visible, but we hear his voice.

EMILY: Come on, big brother. You don't think I can tell when somethin's wrong with you?

SHANE, *off stage*: Well. *Beat.* It's Pat Tillman.

EMILY: I know, the football player, your hero, he's a Ranger now.

SHANE, *off stage, his voice hollow, choked*: He—he got killed, Em.

EMILY: Killed? Pat Tillman? When?

SHANE, *off stage*: Couple days ago. Prob'ly be on the news real soon.

EMILY: But—what happened?

SHANE, *off stage, taking a long time to answer, choked up*: He was leadin' a charge uphill 'gainst an enemy position in Afghanistan.

EMILY: Oh Shane. That's horrible. I'm so sorry. *He says nothing*. He was a hero, wadn't he?

SHANE, *off stage, after another pause, barely audible*: Yeah. He was.

EMILY: Oh my gosh, what was that?

SHANE: What?

EMILY: That—somebody waved a—flag, a Nazi sign, behind you. What the heck?

SHANE, *off stage*: Oh, yeah, McGruder. *He directs his voice away from Emily*. Hey, get the hell outa here with that thing. I told ya don't ever bring that crap in here.

MCGRUDER, *off stage, laughing in the background*: Yeah, well screw you too, Rankin, you nigger-lover.

SHANE, *off stage, disgusted, still speaking away from the webcam*. Bastard! Lowlife son of a bitch!

EMILY: Shane! Shush! What the heck's goin' on? Who is that guy?

SHANE, *sighing*: Aw, we got a couple o'—skinheads. You know, Nazi-types. They're not even in our company, but that one—McGruder, he's a schmuck from New York—he comes over to our hooch sometimes 'cause he knows Rev Jasper and I don't cotton to that sorta thing and he gives us a hard time.

EMILY: Good grief.

SHANE, *off stage*: Tole him to stay the heck out, course he chooses when I'm talkin' with you to barge in. Not many of 'em in the Corps, hear there's more of 'em in the Army. Aryan Brotherhood, they call theirselves.

EMILY: But—can't you report 'em?

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah, the Rev did report 'em, but the commanders turn a deaf ear 'less they go way over the top, 'cause recruitin's down an' I guess we need ever'one we can git, least the Army does. Like I said, I only know of a couple in the Corps. They hate Jews too.

EMILY, *shaking her head in bewilderment*: But that's insane, Shane! They don't call that Nazi flag way over the top? Dad 'n Mr. Hightower 'n those Christians for Israel

people—they all say one of the main reasons we're over there—that you're over there—is to protect Israel.

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah, well, some o' these guys'd soon Israel'd burn in hell with the Moslems as not. Some of 'em'd *ruther* they did.

EMILY: I just can't believe no one'll do anything about it.

SHANE, *off stage*: Well they're no Pat Tillmans. Dang, can't believe he's gone. *Pause*. Course, Rodriguez said he knows an Aryan in Army Special Forces, says he's hell on wheels. Best soldier he ever saw. Don't know why guy like that'd get mixed up in such bidness. *Pause*. Sheesh. All we need with this Abu Grahیب crap.

EMILY: Abu what?

SHANE, *off stage*: Aw, nothin'.

Emily stares at the computer screen and for a moment neither of them speaks.

EMILY: Uhm, I'm gonna go now.

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah? Okay.

EMILY: Yeah. Well I'm sorry 'bout Pat Tillman.

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah me too.

EMILY: 'kay. Let me know if we can talk again on Tuesday.

SHANE, *off stage*: Yeah, I will.

EMILY: Love you.

SHANE, *off stage*: Love you too.

ACT VII

Scene Three

Church, day. Emily and Jake stand talking on the lowered forestage, Emily holding school books under one arm. Amy, Kylie, Rog, Mary Ann, and a couple other students sit in the sanctuary, above and right. Kylie speaks demonstratively, using her arms for emphasis, though we cannot hear what she says.

EMILY: You okay Dad?

JAKE: Yeah, just—

EMILY: What?

JAKE: Aw, Holt's upset 'bout that Abu Dabbu stuff.

EMILY: I think the whole world's upset about it—'cept maybe for George Bush.

JAKE: That ain't fair, Em. Anyhow, he's furious about the pix.

EMILY: Why? That our own soldiers confirmed the truth of every inch o' that newspaper story he said was a bunch of unpatriotic lies, with thousands of their own pix they put on their own blogs and websites and sent to friends and family all over the world? Is he upset 'cause we did all those things he said we'd never do, or 'cause the whole world knows now what a crock our holier-than-thou pretensions are?

JAKE: Goodness, Emily, he's upset 'cause he's disappointed in us an' it makes us look bad an' helps the bad guys—

EMILY: Bad guys? Dad, when are you gonna wake up and realize if the choice is, you're either for or against George W. Bush, the right thing is to be against him? *He starts to speak, but then just stares open-mouthed at her.* You're supposed to be the one who knows, Dad. You're supposed to be the leader. You're supposed to be the pastor. *She sighs and turns to walk away.* You're supposed to be the dad.

She walks, with a slight limp, DS and RS toward the sanctuary, where the students sit, between classes or during a study session. Jake watches her for a moment, shakes his head, then turns and exits LS. In the sanctuary, Amy and Kylie are arguing. Emily stands still a distance from them, cocking her head to hear Kylie.

KYLIE, *excited, conspiratorially, not seeing Emily approach*: So anyway, once he found out it was my eighteenth birthday party, not my seventeenth'—cuz I had to sit out fourth grade when I had mono—he said he couldn't stop watchin' it, over and over.

MARY ANN: So you sent him a cell phone video of you in a bikini?

KYLIE: Not just any bikini. It was more like—a couple of pretty strings.

AMY, *rising in disgust*: Pretty strings, right—for a pretty slut.

KYLIE: Hey!

AMY, *stalking away, LS*: You shouldn't even be at this school. *She stops cold upon nearly colliding head-on with Emily.* Em—

Kylie's head swings around in shock as Emily steps forward, farther into the sanctuary toward her classmates.

KYLIE: Oh, hi Emily. *She whips her head back around toward the front of the room, away from Emily, a sly smirk on her face.*

EMILY, *stepping around to face the coy Kylie*: Did you—and my brother—go out?

KYLIE: Me and Shane? Hah! No way. *Emily relaxes a bit.* I mean, he's a nice—and handsome—boy, but, well, he's a little young for me?

EMILY: Young for you?

KYLIE: Yeah, I'm more into—older—men. Plus, well, no offense, but you know, Shane didn't even go to college. But he does look dreamy with his shirt off—

EMILY: With his shirt off?

KYLIE: Yeah—*she turns to the other students*—‘course, I don't remember much after he got on top of me. Guess that's what chasin' down Long Island Teas with Cuervo Gold'll do for ya. *A couple of the students laugh with Kylie. Rog looks uncomfortable.* Anyhow, I vaguely remember someone shoutin' the f-word over and over again and I think it mighta been Shane, mad cuz I passed out. *She looks back up at Emily and bats her eyelashes.* Silly boy, was his fault I passed out, after all, pourin' all that poison down me. Makin' me throw up and all, an' me layin' there in nothin' but my lil lacy underwear.

Emily's fury mounts and she raises her hand to strike Kylie, but Amy rushes to her and holds her back.

KYLIE: Why what's wrong, Em? Jealous your brother's such a hottie?

Before anything else can happen, Holt hustles in, a couple of books under one arm.

KYLIE: Dad? What're you doin' here?

HOLT, *going to the front of the sanctuary, grabbing the glass lectern, and bringing it down to floor level, in front of the students.* Coach Callahan's wife's havin' her seventh baby right now an' he needed someone to fill in teachin' Bible class today. Had to rush over from the National Guard recruitin' table we got set up this week in the school cafeteria.

These revelations render Kylie about as unhappy as Emily, who trains a blazing glare on her. Amy walks uneasily back to her seat.

HOLT: Understand y'all been havin' some good discussions in here on the war. *Kylie, Rog, and a couple other students nod their heads. Emily finally shifts her glare away from Kylie.* So when you hear the liberals rant about President Bush or the war in Iraq, or when you hear 'em whine 'bout innocent people dyin' in that country, or even in past years 'cause we supposedly kept 'em from gettin' supplies and food they needed, you consider the source, right? These complainers're the same people promote homosex' al marriage, the killin' o' unborn children, and, if they had their way—if the Republicans weren't in control o' all three branches o' the federal government, thank God—would no doubt come up with new laws to imprison pastors for preachin' Christian morality from church pulpits, and even to shut down churches. *Beat.* So why do these Islamo-fascists hate us?

AMY: 'Cause we love freedom?

MARY ANN: They're jealous of all we have?

ROG, *glancing without guile toward Emily:* Pastor Rankin preaches they are God's enemies, so they are acting wickedly. *As Holt nods approvingly, Rog smiles toward Emily, who, troubled, half-smiles back at him.*

KYLIE: When you come down to it, don't they really just hate us because we are good and we stand for good?

EMILY, *her eyes flaring again at Kylie, as she begins to rise. Oh— Amy catches her from behind and pushes her back down into her seat as Holt begins his answer.*

HOLT: 'Course, we need to remember that no one's good by their own nature or power, but we're considered good when we're saved an' justified by the goodness o' Christ. But after that happens, our enemies, as we obey the Lord, well, they're same as His enemies. So, in a rough way of speakin', you're right—these murderous ter'rists, and many others in their countries, hate us cuz o' the good we represent. Like the Bible says, the darkness ain't never liked the light, an' as God shines His light through us, those millions wallowin' aroun' in spiritual darkness, hate, and ever' other manner o' evil, why, they're gonna hate us an' all we stand for.

KYLIE, *with gravitas, glancing at Emily:* Then, is it even possible that a person who opposes the war is a Christian?

Emily stares in speechless fury at her, as the trace of a smirk sneaks across Kylie's face.

HOLT: Well, in fairness, we gotta 'member believin' in Jesus is what makes ya a Christian. But it's pro'ly fair to say a mature believer, one 'at studies and unnerstands Scripture'll almost fer sure figger out what we're doin's a wise, necessary, God-honorin' course o' action. An' like the Reverend Jerry Falwell says—he's head o' Liberty University too, where a couple o' your older brothers an' sisters go to college—God is a God o' war—when it's necessary, course, like this one is.

MALE STUDENT: So this really is a clash of civilizations, then?

HOLT: 'at's good, son, 'at's real good. Yes, in many ways, it is, it shore is.

MALE STUDENT: I thought so. I heard one o' the guys on Fox News say that.

HOLT: Well that's good you listen to Fox News. We finally have a trustworthy conservative network to offset all the liberal ones like NBC and CBS. *He looks right at Emily.* I'm sure all this makes you even more proud to have such a brave brother who's right in the middle of it all, Emily.

Filled with pent-up frustration, worry, and anger, and feeling the eyes of the entire class—especially the preening Kylie—on her, she forces a humble half-smile and nods.

HOLT: Be thankful, students, that you have the pri'lege to grow up in Christian homes, worship in Bible-preachin' Christian churches, learn in a Christian school, and live in a country with a unique Christian heritage and godly Christian leaders, includin' a devoted Christian President—and it don't hurt nobody he's from Texas, neither!

KYLIE: Daddy—uh, Mr. Hightower?

HOLT: Yes, hon?

KYLIE: Most Americans are so proud of all our soldiers and Marines, and so supportive of the courageous sacrifice they are making to protect our freedoms. But what about those—those few—in our country who, for whatever reasons, are against our President, and critical of him and our country itself, even as we try to help the poor unfortunate people of Iraq? When you consider our many soldiers who have suffered, been wounded, sometimes tortured by the enemy, or even killed—well, would you consider these liberal critics of our country—many of whom no doubt profess to be Christians—and its brave fighting men and women, good or evil?

Emily stares at her in wonderment.

HOLT: Well, y'all are pro'ly a lot smarter'n me—especially back in the day when I was a student, so-called. *Most of the students except for Emily, including Amy, laugh.* But if I had to answer that question, considerin' the effect those—critics—how their words make our brave troops, my own son included, feel when they're over there 'n they're scared 'n they're gettin' shot at 'n their buddies are dyin'—well yeah, I'd say they're evil. Whether they realize it or mean to be or not, they're evil, or least they're actin' in a evil way and helpin' the evil side.

Most of the students besides Emily, again including Amy, cheer and clap. Rog looks toward Emily, smiling and nodding. He is surprised when she rises from her seat, her face dark as storm clouds, grabs her books, and turns to limp out.

EMILY, *over her shoulder*: I'm sorry, I have a doctor's appointment. *She glances at Kylie, who is still clapping and who shoots Emily a smarmy and private smile that all but shouts, "See?"*

ACT VII

Scene Four

Rankin house, day. Emily sits in the recliner, punches the keys on her cell phone, her leg up on the ottoman. She leans forward and rubs her propped-up knee with one hand, grimacing as she does.

EMILY, *to herself*: Evil? We're evil? When *they're*—and what are we doin' to my own brother? *She puts the phone to her ear and looks upward.* What are *You* doin' to him! *Someone answers on the phone and she speaks into it.* Yes, Dr. Brewster, please. *Beat.* This is Emily Rankin. *She looks upward again.* Oh Lord, please, I need some good news. I need somethin' to help me know *You're* really there for me. Oh, I so need you there right now. You wouldn't believe it. *Another voice sounds on the phone and she again speaks into it.* I'm sorry I couldn't come in to see you in person like we scheduled, sir, but Dad's got a meetin' and I'm not sure the way my knee's throbbin' that I'd be safe drivin' all the way over there by myself. *Pause.* Sure, Dr. Brewster, I know what it is—my ACL. *I have to have surgery--now?* *Pause, her face growing grave, her voice tight.* Yes sir, I know, I overdid the rehab, but— *Pause.* T-torn in two? My ACL? *Pause.* *Per-manent* damage if I don't have another surgery *now?* *Tears fill her widening eyes, her voice rises.* But—you said the fracture would heal on its own. *Pause, her words rushing out.* If—I do go ahead with the surgery—when will I be alright for basketball—it's my senior year comin' up, and the summer AAU League starts—and all the colleges, they want me to come to their camps and a bunch of them have already offered me full scholar— *Pause, her chin quivering, the tears flooding down her cheeks, her voice plaintive, sounding now like a little girl's, begging for assurance that something awful is not true.* Y-yes sir, my daddy believes it. Yes sir, I believe it too. *Pause.* Yes, I know, all things work together for good to those who love the Lord—my mom always— *Pause.* *Her eyes widen and she starts to jump up, but her knee buckles, she cries out in anguish, falls back into the chair, nearly passes out from the pain, and dissolves into sobs.* I just want to know when I can play again. *Pause as she cries.* Walk—in a couple months? Jog, with a limp, in a few months? *Pause.* Not gonna be able to take jumpin' and leapin' and startin' and stoppin' at full speed? *Beat.* Till—when, Dr. Brewster? *Disbelief covers her face.* *She stares into space for a moment, then drops the phone and leans over the side of the chair. As the stage grows dark, we hear the sounds of her retching and getting sick.*

ACT VIII

Scene One

Rankin house, night. Emily again sits in the recliner, her leg propped up on the ottoman, a brace around her knee. She is again webcasting with Shane, and he is again not visible, though we can hear his voice. Hers is somber.

EMILY: The knee's still pretty stiff, but I'm joggin' pretty good and I can shoot okay.

SHANE, *off screen*: So practice starts in two weeks?

EMILY: Yeah, October 15. Between that and this special new rehab program Coach Callahan got me into at Baylor Hospital, every wakin' moment I'm not in class I'm gonna be rehabbin' or practicin'. Just worried how I'm gonna be able to keep up with Sharmonique and the youth ministry stuff I'm doin' now at church. I'm finally feelin' like I might get back close to where I was before on the court, though. But it's costin' Dad a fortune, 'cause insurance won't cover it?

SHANE, *off screen*: I know you'll do good, I don't give a crap what those freakin' doctors say.

EMILY: Yeah, right. Well, what about you? You got that black cloud-hangin'-over-ya sound in your voice.

SHANE, *off screen*: Aw, always somethin'.

EMILY: What is it? *Long pause.* What, Shane? Why you so secretive?

SHANE, *off screen, voice lowered and pained*: Turns out Pat Tillman was killed by us, not the enemy.

EMILY: What?

SHANE, *off screen*: Friendly fire. Our guys mistook him for the enemy.

EMILY: But—that's crazy. He died leadin' a charge up a hill against the Taliban. You told me yourself.

SHANE, *off screen*: And that's what they told me. It happens, happens in ever' war. Problem is, this time looks like we mighta known what happened but, uh—

EMILY: Covered it up? Lied? To our own people again?

SHANE, *off screen*: Hey, easy.

EMILY: But I'm sick to death o' them lyin' to us, Shane! They been lyin' since the start—since before the start. And they even lie to y'all. *Another long pause.* What?

SHANE, *off screen*: Uh, somethin' else.

EMILY: What?

SHANE, *off screen, lowering his voice further*: Got a good buddy who's best friend helped investigate Tillman's death. Gosh I shouldn't even be talkin' 'bout this, I could get—

EMILY: No, no, tell me, Shane, tell me.

SHANE, *off screen, after a beat*: Well, this guy thinks there's a lot fishy 'bout what happened. Not only is it pretty certain the army sent out a story they knew was false to put the best spin on a national hero's death, but they burned all his gear—his uniform, his body armor. And his diary, which he'd kept since he was sixteen years old—well it disappeared same time he died.

EMILY: Good Lord.

SHANE, *off screen*: Plus, my buddy said some o' the other Rangers on the ground where he died got pressured to change their stories about what happened.

EMILY: What do you mean, pressured?

SHANE, *off screen*: Well. *Pause*. God-da—

EMILY: Shane! Don't say that!

SHANE, *off screen, after sighing*: Well let's say the army and the gov'ment weren't excited 'bout witnesses that backed up the notion that Tillman got his head blown off—literally—

EMILY: Oh my God—

SHANE: --by a tight pattern o' three shots my buddy says came from maybe thirty feet away.

For a moment, Emily stares at her computer.

EMILY: What? Thirty—feet? But—thirty *feet*? But that's like 'cross our livin' room. No one could miss seein' Pat Tillman from thirty feet could they? Was it dark?

SHANE, *off-screen*: That's another thing. Some o' the Rangers—and my buddy too—said the most clueless grunt 'n the army'd know better'n to send Tillman an' his squad into the dangerous canyon they sent 'em into, in the middle o' Indian country—in broad daylight. It's beyond inept. It's—

EMILY: It's what?

SHANE, *off-screen, after another long pause*: Look Em, you gotta swear on Mom's Bible you won't breathe a word o' this to anyone, includin' Dad. Especially Dad. You just can't do it, or I can't tell ya.

EMILY: I swear, I swear, Shane, what is it?

SHANE, *off-screen, after another pause*: Well, turns out Tillman told some his buddies he hated Bush an' he thought the war in Iraq was the most effin' illegal thing he ever saw. Not Afghanistan, Iraq. And— *Pause*. —he was fixin' to meet with some famous anti-war author soon as he got back to the States on leave.

EMILY: *Anti-war?*

SHANE, *off-screen*: Yeah, anti-war. Noah or Noel somebody. *Pause*. I just don't understand it.

EMILY: What are you sayin', Shane?

SHANE, *off-screen, after yet another pause*: Just that it dudn't add up, Em.

EMILY: It adds up to somethin', Shane.

SHANE, *off-screen*: God, if people ever found out ever'thing goin' on over here. *His voice cracks*.

EMILY: Shane, are you sayin' we killed Pat Tillman on purpose?

SHANE, *off-screen*: They shot him from ten yards away, three bulls-eyes, that much I know fer sure, no matter what the media says happened. They blew his freakin' head off, Em—Pat Tillman, who left an All-Pro NFL career and millions o' dollars to go fight for his country! God— *Pause, as he collects himself*. —no one can do that on the move—which the army says they were—even from that close. And his buddies say he was shoutin' at the top his lungs not only that they were Americans, but his own name, plus he'd just set off a colored smoke grenade even a rookie grunt'd know was American.

They both sit in silence.

SHANE, *off screen*: Uh, I gotta get ready.

EMILY: Ready for what?

SHANE, *off screen*: I just gotta git ready. *Beat*. Em, I know I—I let you down a lot last couple years, far as what you thought I was. *His voice cracks again and he fights off sobs*. But I just want you to know I love you more'n anything, Emily, you're just the most precious thing in the world to me—

EMILY: What is it, Shane? What's gettin' ready to happen?

SHANE, *off screen*: I just want you to always remember that, I love you, and I can't even put into words how much I do, and I'm sorry for that too.

EMILY, *trying to calm herself*: Shane Rankin, you tell me right now what's fixin' to happen—you tell me, you hear!

SHANE, *off-screen*: I gotta go, Em. I love you.

EMILY: Shane! *She blanches as we hear the connection end. Her voice lowers to a hollow whisper.* I—love you too. *Her head drops to her chest as the stage goes dark.*

ACT VIII

Scene Two

Rankin house, day, Holt and Jake drinking coffee again. Holt is excited.

HOLT: Hot dang, Jakie boy, biggest attendance ever fer a Christians fer Israel meetin', an' right here in the Metroplex. You know, Jake, the privilege we have o' hearin', o' knowin', o' fellowshipin' and prayin', with the greatest men o' our generation—John Hagee, Jeff Slagle, so many of 'em Texas boys too—why sometimes it just overwhelms me. And the fact God's usin' guys like you and me, too, Jakie, to help write His last, climactic chapters during this dispensation o' grace—it's just more'n I could ever o' dreamed. *He gulps coffee from his cup.* Didja ever stop to think it ain't no accident you're pastorin' one o' the most important churches— an' one in the spiritual ground zero, I might add—o' God's work here on earth, an' now I'm basically runnin' the day-to-day operations o' Pantheon Industries, when you an' I both know they got a lotta boys heck of a lot smarter'n better lookin' 'n me, an' with Harvard MBAs an' Yale an' Stanford an' what-all?

JAKE: They'd o' never thought it back at ole Hereford High, would they?

HOLT: Why Jakie boy, it's bottom o' the ninth, seventh game o' the World Series, bases loaded, two out, an' you an' me, God got us up at the plate, son. *He slaps his hands together.* We right smack in the middle o' the grand finale. *A look of mixed expectancy and teasing covers his face.* Or maybe we just about are.

JAKE: Whaddayu mean, Holt?

HOLT: Jake, you ever think 'at right now, with all the challenges and tribulations the church is facin', from inside an' out—you ever thought this just might be the perfect time for one o' them old-time revivals like used to happen in the early days o' the country, when the spirit o' God'd just bust loose, with no warnin' nor promptin' from folks, just

repentance from sin? How maybe we're on the brink o' the same sorta thing, an' the Christmas season right around the corner?

JAKE: My favorite preacher's still—

HOLT: I know, Jonathan Edwards, the Great Awakenin' started in his church. Tellin' ya buddy, it's comin' again. *Jake starts to respond again, but Holt leans toward him in a confidential manner.* Oh, by the way, buddy. Folks just flat smooth lovin' your End Times series on Sundays now—shoot, we're gettin' 'bout o' big attendance Wednesday now as Sunday. Tell you what, those I-ranians git 'ny more uppity, the Lord may be comin' back even sooner'n you're sayin'.

JAKE: Iraqis you mean?

HOLT: Naw, bro, Iranians. 'at's where the next chapters—the final chapters, least o' this book—are comin' from. Anyhow, I've heard a number of folks, 'cludin' elders, think you're still doin' such a great job on these End Times, they're wonderin' how simple it'd be for ya to weave in jist a bit more about the war an' terrorism and all the good are boys—an' girls—'re doin' over yonder, since it's all part o' the last sequence of events anyhow? What with the newest book in the *Left Behind* series just comin' out, how could the timin' be any better? I know we have the flag hangin' inside 'n out, 'n we pray regular for the troops, but it does seem like we used to have more straight-on about it from the pulpit than we have lately. Anyhow, I think the folks're onto somethin', people git plum wore out with even the best war after a few years, 'n you're so good at those inspirin' kind-lee messages. 'Sides, both our boys over there doin' the Lord's work.

JAKE, *pondering all that for a moment, then nodding in apparent but less-than-enthusiastic compliance*: Sure, Holt, I'll try to work in—a bit more—about it.

HOLT, *clapping his shoulder and shaking his hand*: That's the Jake Rankin I know what built this church from nothin', 'n's buildin' it back even bigger, Youth Pastor scandal or not!

JAKE: Say, lady at nursin' home visitation other day asked about ya, sad she hadn't seen ya on our visits lately—

HOLT: Oh yeah, right. I'll get back on that. Everthin' else alright, bro?

JAKE: Great, just—

HOLT: What?

JAKE: Oh, just 'ppreciate your prayers on this new, experimental-sorta rehab Emily's fixin' to start. It's worked wonders for some o' the pro athletes and we only got it

arranged for her 'cause o' Coach Callahan's connections with the Dallas Cowboys, but good grief it's expensive.

HOLT: Insurance won't cover it?

JAKE: Naw. An' truly, I was hopin' she'd go with us on the mission trip to Peru next summer, but she can't do both that and this. It was her choice, and guess I can't blame 'er.

HOLT: Well she's a great lil basketball player, Jake, and she's dedicated 'erself to it for a long time.

JAKE: Yeah, I know, I'm not really disappointed, I want 'er to be happy, and this is the one shot she's got at gittin' back near to where she was before she got hurt. Plus, the folks pioneered the program say if we're gonna do it, it's gotta be now, real small window o' time her knee'll have a chance to respond like it needs to.

HOLT: Naw, she'd regret it the rest her life if she didn't give it her best shot on this, and you would too, buddy.

JAKE: Yeah, I know you're right.

HOLT: Despite it all, things're lookin' up in ever' direction, Jakie boy. 'Gardless what the liberal media says, I think things never looked better on the warfront either. Little birdie tells me we're finally fixin' to go in and clean out that rat's nest in Fallujah. Hot dang's, gonna be beautiful site to behold. Towelhead scum tore to pieces one end o' that town the other, Old Glory flyin' top o' their courthouse. *He cuts loose with a screeching Rebel Yell.* Guy was right in "National Review" magazine article I read other day. Said ever' ten years or so, U.S. needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show we mean business.

ACT VIII

Scene Three

Church, day, the sound of the praise band, off stage, booming over. Emily, Mary Ann, Rog, Kylie, Sharmonique, Maggie, and others clap along. Jake and Holt sit in their accustomed places up behind the lectern. As the music continues, Holt pulls his cell phone from his pocket and glances at it. Excited, he rises, walks to Jake, and leans down to tell him something. Jake appears interested, but uncertain about something. As the music concludes, Jake pats Holt on the shoulder and scoots away from him toward the lectern.

JAKE, *to congregation*: Well God bless y'all, 'nother great day in the Lord, amen?

CONGREGATION: Amen.

JAKE: Don't forget, today's last day to sign up out in the lobby for workin' on the cleanup and renovation at the orphanage next Saturday. Got over ninety folks on board already. Don'tcha think we can git that over a hundred 'fore we leave today?

CONGREGATION: Amen. Yes.

JAKE: Great. Some o' y'all already mentorin' kids from the orphanage, and I know some more o' ya are interested in doin' that. Three of 'em at least've already received Jesus as their savior and are part of our congregation now.

MAGGIE: Praise God.

JAKE: That's right. Well, we'll git to meet a bunch more of 'em Saturday. Till then, even in the midst o' this sin-wrecked society, remember the words o' the great 20th-Century American missionary martyr Jim Elliot—"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." So everyone go out this week an' give—at the orphanage, at the jail where we're goin' Thursday, in Mexico where some o' y'all are goin'— *He looks at Emily and Sharmonique.* —in the inner city. Give what God has given to you—the words an' deeds of, the belief in, Jesus Christ. And surely we'll all receive that precious crown o' righteousness Paul spoke of that's laid up in heaven for the Lord's own. God bless y'all!

HOLT, *rushing to Jake's side*: Uh, hold just a sec! Uh, and praise God, Pastor Jake, great benediction, brother. Just wanted to add one thing we just this moment learned. We have officially eliminated the last significant pocket of ter'rist resistance in Fallujah—our boys have done it, they've won the Battle of Fallujah!

The praise band, still off stage, sounds a short celebratory burst and a chorus of cheers goes up, though Emily registers no discernible reaction, grabbing Sharmonique's hand and starting for the door, sporting a very slight limp. Behind her, Mary Ann listens to a message on her cell phone, then shrieks in horror.

EMILY, *whirling toward Mary Ann*: What is it, honey?

MARY ANN, *loudly*: Tommy—he—he—he died in— *She glares at Holt at the lectern.* —he died in—Fallujah. He got blown up! *She shrieks again and races screaming RS out of the church.*

EMILY, *her voice beginning to quiver*: Oh—no. No God, please, not Tommy.

From all around the sanctuary, a mix of sounds emerge—cries of anguish, low pained murmurs, expressions of astonishment, weeping. Emily leads Sharmonique DS onto the forestage between the church and the audience, as Holt mutely lowers his head, Jake hurries RS after Mary Ann. The church stage lights go dark and the forestage remains lit. Emily sits down and weeps softly as Sharmonique tries to console her.

SHARMONIQUE: What's wrong, Emily? Did somebody die?

EMILY, *looking at the girl, then pulling her to herself*: Yes, Sharm darlin', somebody died, someone very, very special.

ROG, *entering DS from the darkened church*: Emily? *She barely glances toward him. He sits down next to her, shaken.* Tommy—I just can't believe it.

Emily pats Sharmonique, then releases her, sniffles, opens her own purse, pulls an envelope out, and hands it to Rog. He opens it and pulls out something.

ROG: It's from Tommy. A picture of him and me, when he took me inner tubing on the Brazos River. *He pulls something else out of the envelope.* And—a certificate or something.

EMILY: Just got it yesterday. He remembered how much you loved ridin' go-carts with him, so he sent me the money to buy you a free pass for the whole season. *Her voice cracks and her eyes widen.* Musta cost him—an' he didn't have any extra money—he didn't have any money at all. But—he loved you and knew you needed the Lord and didn't think you had Him, even though you say you do. *She buries her head in her hands and weeps softly as Sharmonique embraces her.*

ROG, *staring at the items and shaking his head*: I—everyone thinks Americans are so—greedy and self-centered. But—that's not what I've seen at all. Shane saved my life with that dog, Mr. Hightower arranged free tuition for me at Texas A & M where he went to college if I want to go there, the church has bought me an entire new wardrobe of clothes—beautiful American clothes. And now—Tommy.

EMILY, *looking back up, staring ahead, her voice periodically cracking*: Tommy O'Rourke, poorest and kindest and best boy in our school, from kindergarten on. His mom raised five children and worked three jobs sometimes so he could come to a Christian school way she never could. He never was the biggest or ran the fastest or jumped the highest—but he loved the boys who did. And he helped the smallest and slowest and—and he died still helpin' 'em, in his mind. *Pause.* God I hate this damned war!

Rog flinches at the volume and ferocity of her shout.

ROG: You—do?

EMILY, *turning toward him*: Yes, Rog, I'm sorry, but we should never have gone over there, it was all lies and it's been all death and destruction since, and poor Mrs. O'Rourke— *She begins slowly shaking her head, as the tears come again.* —Oh I don't know, after all the heartbreak she's had, I don't see how she can ever get over this. He

was her pride and joy, and after her—husband—ran off with that trashy young thing—Tommy was the only one kept her goin’.

ROG: But—I thought everyone here was for the war. Shane—your own brother—is fighting in it.

EMILY: Yes and I think he was in Fallujah too and I haven’t heard from him in over a week and it’s drivin’ me crazy wonderin’ if anything’s happened to him. Oh how I loath this cursed war and Bush and Cheney and all their kind! They were all cowards and draft dodgers during Vietnam but now they’re real brave with other folks’ children. I think my dad’s just about come around to my way o’ thinkin’, too. *Her face twists up at him, in pain.* Oh I’m sorry, Rog, I thank God you’re here, but we should never have gone over there! *She climbs to her feet and reaches for Sharmonique’s hand.* Come on Sharm, baby, let’s go home.

Rog stares after her as she exits LS. Confusion covers his face and he shakes his head.

ROG: But—I don’t understand.

ACT VIII

Scene Four

Rankin house. Emily lays face up on the couch, staring at the ceiling, arms folded behind her head. On the radio is John Michael Montgomery’s poignant Iraq War-era country ballad “Letters From Home,” about a U.S. soldier’s feelings regarding letters written to him by family members back home.

JOHN MICHAEL MONTGOMERY, *off stage, singing*: I hold it up and show my buddies, like we ain’t scared and our boots ain’t muddy, and they all laugh, ‘cause she calls me “Honey,” but they take it hard, ‘cause I don’t read the good parts. I fold it up an’ put it in my shirt, pick up my gun an’ get back to work an’ it keeps me driving me on, waiting on letters from home.

She goes to the concealed spot in the room and pulls out Daisy’s diary. She carries it back to the couch, plops across it on her stomach, opens the diary, and reads for a moment.

JOHN MICHAEL MONTGOMERY, *off stage, singing, simply but poignantly*: Dear son, I know I ain’t written, but sittin’ here tonight, alone in the kitchen, it occurs to me, I might not have said, so I’ll say it now son, you make me proud.

Fretting, she gets up, walks to a framed portrait of Shane, grabs it, and stares at it.

JOHN MICHAEL MONTGOMERY, *off stage, singing*: I hold it up and show my buddies, like we ain’t scared and our boots ain’t muddy, but no one laughs, ‘cause there

ain't nothing funny when a soldier cries an' I just wipe my eyes. *Emily holds Shane's portrait to her chest, hangs her head, and begins again to quietly weep.* I fold it up an' put it in my shirt, pick up my gun an' get back to work an' it keeps me driving me on, waiting on letters from home.

As the song fades out, knocks sound at the Rankins' front door. Emily doesn't at first hear them, but after several knocks, she puts down Shane's portrait, rubs her eyes, hurries LS to the door, and opens it. A pretty young blonde woman, MARLA RUZICKA, stands there.

EMILY, *her eyes still wet*: Uh, if you're lookin' for my dad, he's not here, he's preachin' down at the homeless shelter tonight in Dallas.

MARLA, *with Northern California accent, gentle and sweet*: No, I was looking for you. You're Emily, right?

EMILY, *startled, rubbing her eyes some more*: Uhm, yes, I'm Emily. But—

MARLA: I just wanted to encourage you and say good for you, you're working so hard with that little girl. And the war—I know you love your brother and he's a good boy and he's—he's hurting. *Emily's eyes well over again and she stifles another sob.* But you're standing up for what you know is right and decent, even when sometimes you have to stand all alone. *Emily's throat chokes up and she doesn't know what to say.* But I wanted to tell you that you're not alone.

Then she smiles, turns, and steps away to leave.

EMILY: But—who are you?

MARLA, *turning back to her*: I am so proud of you, you are a very brave girl, Emily. *She leaves LS. Emily stares after her, confused.*

ACT VIII

Scene Five

Church, at night, dimly lit. Rog walks in alone from RS. He speaks aloud, walking around the room.

ROG: Now I almost hate to do it. These people almost make me forget they killed my real family in Fallujah. But when I found pieces of the rocket in the rubble that had been our loving home, whose name did it have on it? The Pantheon Corporation. Amazing what a person can learn on the Internet. They can learn enough about Mr. Holt Hightower that with the blessing of Allah—and committed freedom fighting jihadists from many countries—they can wind up in Mr. Hightower's church one Sunday morning, blowing him and it up, and with that person's own image left behind to announce to the

world—by way of the Internet—just exactly why that church and its leading “elder” was destroyed. May it be pleasing to the one true god Allah himself—and may it resound through history as a mighty blow for all that is right and virtuous in this world against those wicked men and their hateful weapons of destruction, and their blasphemous, arrogant, immoral, and violent ideals. *He steps up to the lectern and places his hands on it.* If not for the goodness and faithfulness of Allah, their individual acts of—kindness—should have caused me to falter, almost did cause me to do so. They—I—did not expect— *He sighs, shakes his head, and gathers himself.* But all the more reason to act now with a full heart, that others in the future who might be won to the one true way and accomplish much good, even in America, might not be misled by these captains of villainy and treachery. And when Pantheon itself and the other Dallas targets are destroyed upon the signal of this church’s destruction—oh, how long we have waited for the good to respond to the wealthy murderous Crusaders and Zionists! Then shall I finally be reunited with my mother and father and little brothers and— *He begins to choke up.* –And my precious baby sister Abeer. Then, finally. Soon, God. Soon.

ACT VIII

Scene Six

Rankin home, day. Jake kneels near the dining table, head bowed, in silent prayer. He finishes the prayer, exhales, and rises just as Emily approaches with a couple of small luggage bags, which he takes.

EMILY: Thanks, Dad. I know this treatment is costing you a fortune.

JAKE, *shaking his head*: Nah, thank Coach Callahan, he’s the one pulled the strings to getcha in. *She stands still, staring at the wall.* Somethin’ wrong, babe?

EMILY: Oh, it just hit me how every chance I get in life is ‘cause you or someone else steps up for me. I—I think I’m pretty self-centered.

JAKE, *walking to her and putting an arm around her shoulders*: I think you’re doin’ pretty good. We all need folks helpin’ us. *He steps back over and picks up the bags.* ‘sides, remember that study I told you about? Teenagers’ brains aren’t yet fully formed.

EMILY, *with mirth*: Oh, shutup, Daddy!

JAKE, *over his shoulder as he carries out the bags and exits LS*: Can’t wait for the right opportunity to feature that ‘n a sermon. Maybe I’ll do that this week. No, you won’t be there, ‘cause o’ the rehab. Next week, then.

She throws a banana at him as he exits, hitting the wall next to the door.

EMILY, *to herself, excited, as she gathers her purse and heads for the door*: Three days comin’ up at the best rehab place in the country, then back to practice, and so far I’m

doin' fine, considerin' what happened. *She looks toward the ceiling.* Oh, it's gonna be a great senior year, Lord, I can tell! Sherri Coale is gonna call me yet. Thank you, Lord! *Her cell phone sounds and she stops to answer it.* Hello? *Pauses separate her various statements as she listens to Sharmonique's voice on the other end of the line.*

Sharmonique? What is it, honey? Your mom's in jail? For how long? Oh no. But—what about your aunt? They have no idea? Your dad left town again? But your older brother— Oh, his girl friend won't let you come over? I'm so sorry, honey. Yes, I've been by myself quite a bit. I know, it can be scary. *Her sadness for Sharmonique begins to blend with anxiety for herself.* But I'm sure someone will show up soon. What about your neighbors? Oh gosh, no, don't talk to them. *Jake comes back into the house.* Uh, Sharmonique, honey? My dad just got here and I'm going to talk to him about this. Do you have your Bible with you? Okay, go get it and read that Psalm we went through the other night at your apartment, and I'll call you back in just a few minutes, okay? Yes, that's the one. No, I promise I'll call you back. Sharmonique. When I say I'll do something, do I do it, least now'days? Okay, please read that Psalm and know that God loves you and is protectin' you this very moment and I'll call you right back, okay, honey? Alright, I love you. Bye-bye.

JAKE: What is it, Em?

EMILY: Dad, Sharmonique's all alone. Her mom's in jail! None of her other relatives are anywhere around and the neighbors who are—well, she doesn't need to be around them.

JAKE: Goodness.

EMILY: Dad, you've got to bring her home. She's down there in that awful neighborhood in South Dallas all by herself. She's just a child and—

JAKE: Emily, honey, I can't just go an' get her.

EMILY: Even if you get someone else in the church to take her, can you just go get her after you drop me off at the hospital?

JAKE: Emily, sit down for a second, buddy. *Confused, she joins him in a chair at the dining table.* Look, uh, I was gonna tell ya on the way to the hospital, but—well, Sunday, I'm gonna do somethin' I shoulda done a long time ago. *Beat.* I'm gonna preach, best as I can, what I think Jesus would say about this war, and most especially about the ungodly mindset got us in it.

EMILY: What? But Dad—

JAKE: No use tryin' to talk me out of it. You been right about this for a long time, darlin', and—so was your mother. I—well I been readin' that diary too. I know where your little hidin' place is.

EMILY: Dad!

JAKE: Listen, the final straw for me was—the other night. I noticed the few texts and e-mails I've gotten from Shane since that battle in Fallujah've been—

EMILY: Strange?

JAKE: Yeah, strange. I think he was right in the middle of it all, an' I think—I think some bad things musta happened.

EMILY: He's only written me once since it happened, and it didn't even seem like him writin' it. He says he can't webcast any more either.

JAKE: He'll be back in a couple o' days an' frankly, I'm glad you won't be here when he arrives. I want to take stock of him first. And look, I'm also glad you won't be at church this Sunday when I say my piece.

EMILY: But Dad—Mr. Hightower and some of the others. The whole church—what are you gonna say?

JAKE: Well, I'm gonna try an' say, best as I can, what I think the Lord would say, and reflect however I can what His Word does tell us.

EMILY: Oh Dad. *Pause. She looks away, biting her lip, her mind churning.* My friends, the school. *She turns back to him.* Dad—what if you lose your job?

JAKE, *sighing*: I—I expect to, Em.

EMILY: What?

JAKE: I heard Mr. Hightower's views on what he'd do if our friend Sam Shahan preached the same message o' peace he recently did, at a church where Mr. Hightower was an elder. And the majority our elders agree with him.

EMILY: Oh no. What did he say?

JAKE: Let's just say I have no doubts it's the right thing to do, 'cause the idea only came to me—and certainly the courage to follow through with it—since I been back on my knees, an' sometimes face, in prayer before God ever' mornin' like I used to do when I—before I sorta lost my way.

EMILY: Lost your way? But—

JAKE: So I'm sorry, but you need to call Sharmonique back an'—actually, I'll try to call Child Protective Services an' alert 'em. Gosh, I got a counselin' session with one o' our

young couples who're in trouble after I drop you at the hospital, then I got—but I'll call 'em on the cell between stops.

EMILY: So—what will happen to her, dad?

JAKE: I don't know, honey. Why's her mother in jail?

EMILY: Sharmonique said she's been usin' and sellin' drugs. She said her arms are covered with needle wounds and her mom's skinny as a stick and sick all the time. Different men comin' and goin'. And—I get the feelin' she's been in jail—or prison—before, for quite awhile when Sharmonique was younger.

JAKE, *shaking his head, standing, and walking toward the door*: It's just awful, Em. Well, we better go, we're runnin' late. *Emily stays in her chair, staring out the window.* Let's go, sweetie.

EMILY, *looking at him, her eyes wet with tears, but gleaming, and a smile on her face*: I'm proud of you, Dad. I never dreamed you would do such a thing. I used to think you did them all the time, but—well, to do it now. The church, buildin' it, gettin' your own radio show, the new buildings, gettin' invited to speak at church and men's gatherings all over the country, even on TV. And now— *She chokes back sobs, but they are sobs of pride and love.* Now you're riskin' it all to do somethin' even the people in our own church won't like or understand, because you think it's right—in God's eyes. *She stands up.* Dad? I'm ready to go.

JAKE: Good, let's vamoos.

EMILY: But I don't want to go to the rehab hospital, Dad.

JAKE: What?

EMILY: We're goin' to Sharmonique's and we're pickin' her up and we're bringin' her back here till we can get some good help for her, however long that takes?

JAKE: But Emily, I can't take care—

EMILY: I know, Dad. I will, least however much I have to.

JAKE: But—

EMILY: I don't know all the answers yet, Dad. I just know she needs us—she needs me—she needs to know Jesus is real and I think I'm the only way she's gonna see that right now.

JAKE: Em, you can't take care of a little girl from the rehab hospital. I'll wind up—

EMILY: Dad! I'm not goin' to rehab.

JAKE: Huh?

EMILY: It's over, Dad. I—the doctors said I'd get normal use back in my knee if I'd just follow a sane rehab plan for awhile and quit killin' it with basketball.

JAKE: But Emily—

EMILY: Dad, basketball's gotten to where it takes everything—more than everything I have, that we have. It takes all my time, all my energy, all our extra money. And now it might not be extra money, it might be money we need bad. It's become my—god. *He stares at her, speechless.* I don't know why, Dad, but I think God's sayin' basketball is over for me and— *Her voice cracks, but a smile again shines across her face.* He—I can't believe I'm sayin' this, Dad—I think He has some more important things for me to do now. *He stares at her for a long moment, then collapses weeping into a chair at the table. Startled, she leans over and enfolds him in her arms as sobs rack his body.* Daddy, it's alright. It's the strangest thing, it's like a cloud's lifted's been hangin' over me for so long. Don't be sad, Daddy. I'm sure God—

JAKE, *sobbing*: I'm not sad. I'm—overwhelmed at how blessed I am to have the kind of daughter a father can only dream about having.

EMILY: Oh I love you so much, Daddy.

JAKE, *turning and hugging her too*: I love you too, Emmy girl.

ACT IX

Scene One

Rankin home, day. Emily and Shane sit at the dining table, Shane in his beribboned and –medaled uniform, wolfing food, Emily writing on a notebook page with her Bible open next to it.

EMILY: So who was she?

SHANE, *while chewing*: Don't remember 'er name. I was usually distracted when I was around 'er or guardin' 'er, 'specially 'cause it was, uh, dangerous ever'where.

EMILY: So this pretty young blonde-headed American girl was walkin' door to door, askin' what civilians had been killed or hurt by our weapons, so she could get the U.S. government to help them out with food and medical attention and money—in the middle of a war zone?

SHANE: Jeez Em, the whole freakin' country's a war zone.

EMILY: Did she have, like, a helmet or armor and stuff on?

SHANE, *looking up to stare at her in mid-bite*: Lord, you're goin' to college next year? *He breaks out in good-natured laughter.*

EMILY: Come on, Shane, you're tellin' me the whole thing isn't a little strange?

SHANE, *wolfing again*: Yeah it's strange, but what the heck. Nobody's safe over there. Some big-shot senators come over so they could brag first-hand when they got home how much progress we've made and how much good we've done the country. Only thing is, they nearly got their asses shot out of the sky in their own chopper right over one o' our biggest bases in Baghdad. But *she*—she seemed like she was—protected. Charmed. An' she helped ever'body. Iraqis, foreign journalists, our soldiers. *He pauses and stares ahead, serious for the first time.* Me. *Pause.* She was the only one helped me.

EMILY: You? How did she help you?

SHANE, *still staring ahead, then turning to Emily, earnestly*: I think she may o' been a' angel, Em.

EMILY, *startled*: An angel? *Sharmonique enters the room from US, in a pretty dress.* Sharmonique, honey—you look beautiful! *This both embarrasses and pleases the girl, and she giggles.* *Emily collects her notebook and Bible and stands.* Well alright then, we better git, I got a kids' Sunday School lesson to teach— *She notices Shane is staring ashen-faced at Sharmonique, stationary in mid-bite, his full mouth open.* What's wrong?

His eyes narrow, his fists clench, and he glares in fury at Sharmonique. He rises and starts to step toward her, then stops, seems in great turmoil, and sweeps his plate, glass, and other items off the table. They fly across the room en masse and smash into pieces against the wall. Emily and Sharmonique jump back in speechless shock, Sharmonique grabbing for Emily, who holds the younger girl to her. Shane, his face tormented, turns and storms out of the house LS. Emily and Sharmonique stare after him in stunned silence.

ACT IX

Scene Two

Church, later that day. Jake, Holt, and Shane sit at the front, behind the lectern, Shane in his uniform. Amy, Mary Ann, Maggie, and Kylie sit in the audience facing the front. Rog stands toward us, distant from the lectern. Emily and Sharmonique enter from LS and approach him. He is startled to see them.

ROG: Emily! I—I thought you were gone this weekend.

EMILY: No, I'm here.

ROG: But—you were supposed to be gone.

EMILY: Change of plans. Is somethin' wrong?

ROG: No, uh, I—no, nothing is wrong.

She walks past him toward her seat, confused by his troubled demeanor as Jake goes to the lectern.

JAKE, *to the congregation*: Now we've got a special guest, and I guess we all know him. *He turns back to Shane.* Son, come on up. *Jake starts clapping, and everyone else stands and follows suit. Shane ambles to the lectern, shaking Jake's proffered hand as he gets there.* 'Course he won't say anything about it, but I will—that shiny new one there is a Bronze Star fer valor. *The ovation grows deafening, punctuated by cheers. Shane looks at the floor, seemingly amused.*

SHANE, *to the congregation, after the applause dies down*: Uh. 'Sup? *He laughs as some in the congregation exchanges glances. Rog paces nervously near the back.* Well, uh, I'm back. *He laughs again. His words have none of the boyish but confident coherence of previous church appearances.* So—y'all got 'ny questions? *He laughs again as Jake and Holt exchange a look. For a moment, no one says anything. Then Kylie stands up, decked out in a tight, eye-catching dress.*

KYLIE, *as flirtatious as she dare be in church*: Shane, I know most of us girls here, well we've all just always adored you! But what about those lil Iraqi girls—do we have anything to worry about with them?

Shane blushes and looks down as some in the congregation chuckle, but others exchange irritated glances.

SHANE: Nah—well.

KYLIE: What, hon?

SHANE: Way things're goin' over there, don't think ya have to worry any.

KYLIE: Oh? Well, you goin' back over there?

SHANE: I imagine in a few months, but, well—

KYLIE: What?

SHANE, *irritation creeping in*: Nothin', nothin'.

ROG: So Shane, were you in the Battle of Fallujah?

SHANE: Me? Ha, heck yeah I was. Up to my neck in it.

ROG: We won, right?

SHANE: Dang straight we did.

ROG: So—how does Fallujah look now?

SHANE, *emitting a strange, hollow chuckle, his eyes bright and glinting in an unnatural way, his face set in a half-smile*: The last time I saw Fallujah—it was in rubble.

Everyone stops and stares at this. Emily is stunned, Rog stricken. Holt mumbles something to Jake, then stands and walks to Shane, puts an arm around his shoulder, and speaks to the congregation.

HOLT: Y'all have a right to be real proud o' how ya supported both Shane and my boy Josh last couple years with your prayers an' encouragements.

EMILY, *whispering to Amy*: And Tommy?

HOLT: Jim an' the Dickinsons—y'all sent 'em both those expensive night vision glasses gov'ment didn't git 'em. Bill, you and the Weatherfords, y'all sent steel sheets to give their Humvees decent protection when the politicians couldn't git that done either. Musta cost y'all small fortune. Anyhow, speakin' for both the Rankins and Hightowers, we 'ppreciate 'cha. I wanna encourage y'all it's all worth it. *He glances back at Jake*. If Pastor Rankin'll gimme just a sec, I wanna leave y'all with a word here.

Jake's mouth opens slightly in surprise, but then he catches himself and nods.

HOLT, *clearing his throat, but excited*: Well alright then. Folks, ever'thing goin' on over there in the Middle East is just so important, not just 'cause it's protectin' America, the one beacon o' freedom in this dark world—'portant as that is. But even more important, as some o' y'all know, this is all right on God's time table, and we need to make sure we on the right side that time table an' not the wrong.

MALE VOICE IN CONGREGATION: Amen.

HOLT: And folks—we doin' *so* good over there. Now some of us as y'all know are part of a great organization known as Christians fer Israel. We've learned some amazin' things there. You know, fer instance, that Iran—you heard me right, *Iran*—may already have the nukulir cap'bility to make a bomb they can ship er courier wherever they want? Right now, in April 2005, we have information the Iranians are workin' on plans to simultaneously detonate nukulir bombs in seven American cities, or use a fancy 'lectromagnetic pulse device to create “an American Hiroshima.”

Whispers and murmurs sound from the congregation. Jake appears surprised and uncomfortable.

HOLT: ‘fore y’ all git too spooked, though, lemme ask y’ all this—do we need to fear a nukulir showdown?

MAGGIE: No.

Anger covers Emily’s face and she looks around, incredulous. Rog, still pacing near the back, exhibits a similar reaction. The words that follow do not improve their demeanors.

HOLT: I suggest we don’t, an’ that what we *should* fear is the wrath of a holy an’ almighty God if we kick back in are easy chairs front our big screen TVs while Iran wipes out Israel—which it has promised to do repeatedly!

More whispers sound from the congregation.

HOLT: Those you in are Bible Study class know we been studyin’ how all this was laid out thousands o’ years ago in one ‘o the earliest books in the Old Testament—the book o’ Esther, which gives us a roadmap to reality an’ predicts where the next world "hot spot"’ll be.

MALE VOICE IN CONGREGATION: Iran.

HOLT: That’s right, Iran, or Persia as it was called back then.

VOICES IN THE CONGREGATION: Amen.

HOLT: The Bible—not me, not Pastor Rankin, not Dr. Slagle, though y’ all heard all of us teach it—predicts a fight with Iran. An’ like Dr. Slagle said, Israel’ll have to strike at Iran’s nukulir facilities, with or without America’s help. Then Russia’ll attack Israel and God’ll devastate the Russians. Then the Antichrist’ll rise up to fill the power vacuum and he’ll put the world through the Great Tribulation. Then Red China—the same godless nation the liberals today want us to be buddies with—will face the Antichrist and the socialistic European Union in the Battle o’ Armageddon.

Jake grows increasingly disturbed.

MAGGIE: Amen.

MALE VOICE: Yes.

HOLT: Then finally—finally!—Jesus will return on a white horse an’ cast both these vermin—an’ ever’ other of the pro’ly billions o’ nonbelievers—into a lake o’ fire burnin’ with brimstone. *He turns back to a very uncomfortable Jake.* Pastor, I’m done now, I’ll just finish by remindin’ us— *He turns back to the congregation.* –that nukulir war

between America an' Iran is predicted way back in the Old Testament book o' Jeremiah. But if you remember anything I said here today—please, remember this! That war'll lead not to the *end* o' the world, but to God's re-establishin' paradise on earth, a new Garden o' Eden, to welcome back His Son Jesus Christ in glory! Amen? *Emily's head, shaking, droops.*

VOICES IN THE CONGREGATION: Amen!

HOLT: Folks, we livin' in the last days. Most exciting days in church history. But we are facin' the most dangerous moment ever fer America. Brothers an' sisters, Iran already has the power to destroy Israel *an'* America. An' like Dr. Slagle said—we better back Israel, people.

MALE VOICE IN CONGREGATION: Amen.

HOLT: We better protect the Jews.

MAGGIE: Amen.

HOLT: This 21st-century Hitler—this gangster president o' Iran, Ahmanramadan or whatever his name is— *A few people in the congregation snicker.* —has put in place a plan to exterminate the Jews with nukulir warfare. If we stand by, I *gar*-antee ya, God's wrath'll fall on us too. *He takes a breath and looks around his agreeing audience as he sets for the climax. He doesn't see Jake fidgeting and squirming.* The United States must join Israel in a pre-emptive military strike against Iran to fulfill God's lovin' plan for both Israel an' what's left o' the Christian world. *Emily rises in barely-silent anger, takes Sharmonique's hand, and leads her out of the sanctuary, RS. Amy, heretofore happy, watches her leave, concerned. Rog watches too, startled.* An' who but the church o' Jesus Christ has the wisdom, the knowledge, the understanding to lead this country to that magnificent destiny? And where does that destiny lead? Why I don't have to tell a lot o' y'all it leads to the fulfillment o' God's amazin' plan—laid out right there in the pages o' First Thessalonians, Revelations, and elsewhere—for an end-time confrontation with Iran, which'll lead to the Rapture, the Tribulation, an' the Second Comin' of Christ. *Rog walks slowly toward the lectern.*

MALE VOICE IN CONGREGATION: Amen, come quickly.

HOLT, *turning to a grim-faced Jake, who has risen from his seat and now also approaches the lectern:* And who but pastors like Pastor Jake here, the spiritual generals of America, have the equipping an' anointing to lead the church in that high calling? *Beat.* I ask you now, is God in control of all things?

VOICES IN CONGREGATION: Yes.

HOLT: Is He in control o' *these* things?

VOICES IN CONGREGATION: Yes!

HOLT, *louder*: Then whadda we have to fear from war with Iran?

VOICES IN CONGREGATION: Nothing!

HOLT, *louder still*: Fact, we got anything to fear *except* goin' to war with Iran?

VOICES IN CONGREGATION: No!

HOLT: Amen, praise God y'all. *He turns to Jake, next to him, and pats him on the back. Alright, Jake, all yours. Got 'em warmed up for ya, buddy. Jake does not smile. Holt puts an arm around Shane and they walk back to their chairs.*

As Holt and Jake shift positions and Rog slowly nears the front of the church, toward us from the lectern, Marla silently enters from the back, US, opposite where Emily has left and Rog entered. She walks to the front row and sits. Rog continues slowly toward the lectern, beginning to unbutton the sportcoat he wears. As he nears Marla, she turns and smiles at him. Both his feet and hands stop and he stares at her.

Jake appears determined and about to speak, but as he looks out over the congregation, he hesitates, seems uneasy, looks down, and shifts his feet.

DAISY, *off-stage*: If you think somethin' needs to be said that a shepherd should say, for the good o' our people, you better say it.

Jake's head rises slowly, he faces the congregation again, and his jaw sets. When he begins to speak, Rog turns and looks up toward him.

JAKE: The message I have for you today is, I pray, from God an' not man. I believe He's kindled it within me for a long time. But—I've feared men rather'n God. I've held my own name an' lot in higher esteem than the Lord's. I've brought reproach on the office o' pastor an' the name o' Christ. I've spoken when I ought not to have an' I've kept quiet when I shoulda spoken. I have sinned. Against y'all, against are church, against Christ. Today I confess this an' I publicly repent of it. I repent o' falsely leadin' an' misleadin' ya. O' callin' good evil an' evil good. *His voice tightens as confusion spreads across the faces of his congregation.* I repent an' I ask your forgiveness. The prophet Amos wisely observed, in the midst o' old Israel's lamentations, that when calamity comes upon a city, you should know that the Lord did it. Our country an' our church correctly assessed the wickedness an' tragedy o' 9/11, an' rightly called upon God-ordained human gov'ment to execute justice with the sword. But we failed to face another truth—are own culpability in that catastrophe. Blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus said, for they shall be called the sons of God. But truth is, it's been a long time since are country or the American church been peacemakers—if we ever truly been. The church o' Christ in America hadn't stood mutely by as wicked men an' actions advanced in countries 'round the globe—in are name an' financed by are dollars—no, too often

we've led the advance. *Horror covers Holt's face.* Without the church's lead, the fiasco in Iraq likely couldn't even o' happened. Like with the Popes an' Roman church durin' the Crusades, we've written our name in infamy on the pages of American an' world history. It's time to say enough. *Holt stands up from his chair, his face anguished.* We've broken legions o' laws, great an' small. The leaders are gov'ment—crowin' and cowerin' alike behind the shield are brave military—ha' shredded the rule o' law near an' far. We broken the laws o' other nations an' are own. We've ignored international statues o' law *when we wanted an' broken 'em where we wanted.* We made a mockery of our own history, our own Constitution, an' the efforts o' millions of American parents to teach their children right from wrong. Our Foundin' Fathers an' our Lord alike'd keen at a nation like ares, with so much goodness an' greatness in its beginnings, sendin' armed soldiers to more'n a hunnerd'n thirty countries aroun' the world, imprisoning scores o' so-called enemies with no charges, confiscatin' countless billions, even trillions of its own citizens' dollars to finance never-ending unnecessary projects at home an' dangerous ones abroad, sendin' the most lethal weapons ever devised into unnumbered villages, towns, an' cities, an' terrorizin', wounding, maiming, and killin' the aged, the infirmed, women, an' children. The count o' such acts is known only to God. But always, as we kill one person an' destroy one neighborhood or town, we raise up ten that hate us. We're multiptyin' enemies that'll threaten our children, grandchildren, an' great-grandchildren their whole lives. Worse, we're actin' in ways the Bible assures'll keep us from the protection of a just an' merciful God—

HOLT, *striding toward the lectern:* Pastor! Hold on, Jake! *Jake turns toward Holt as the latter arrives, stunned, breathless, and forcing a smile.* Buddy, uh, what're ya sayin'?

JAKE, *calmly:* I'm preachin' the sermon, Holt.

HOLT: Well—gosh, Jake, sermon?

JAKE: Take a seat, why don'tcha?

HOLT: Well-- *Red faced, he glances out at the congregation.* Are ya gonna keep talkin' like ya are?

JAKE: Oh I expect so, only a little more animated, maybe.

HOLT, *looking out toward the congregation, his voice tight and strained:* Maggie, Kylie—we're leavin'. The rest you elders—meet me in the Granite Conference Room soon's the service is over. *He turns to Jake.* Unbelievable. Better not git too passionate, buddy, fact, better not say much else at all. *The two stare for a moment into one another's eyes, Holt's blazing, Jake's steady.* *For a moment, Holt looks as though he is considering trying to forcibly remove Jake from the lectern, but something in Jake's steely countenance causes him to blink, shake his head, and hurry out, RS.* *Maggie and Kylie follow, humiliated and shooting angry looks at Jake, Maggie shaking her head.*

MAGGIE: What'd Daisy think, Jake?

JAKE, *after they exit*: What would Daisy think, indeed? She might just think I finally came to my senses—an' maybe stood up on my hind legs too. Sadly, Daisy came to her senses long before I did. Dear brothers and sisters, I proclaim, belatedly, to you, the good news o' Jesus Christ, who came to set sinners free. But He came bearin' John 3:16, not an M-16. *He looks back at Shane, who stares straight ahead, eyes glazed and shining. He turns back to the transfixed congregation, tears in his own eyes, his voice choked.* And we have paid the price o'—mixin' the cross with the sword. Oh I don't 'spect most o' y'all to agree with what I'm sayin', or even to understand, but I gotta say it. We're not to return evil fer evil. Worse fer us, God is opposed to the proud—but the good news is, He gives grace to the humble. If we shall indeed, humble areselfs an' pray, an' seek His face, an' turn from are wicked ways, then He promises He *will* hear us from heaven, an' will forgive are sin, an' will heal are land. An' God had'n view the church o' Christ, not America or any other geopolitical nation when he said that. We must go forth near an' far, humbled an' repenting of are vanity an' pride an' materialism an' violence an' hatred, an' we must love the unsaved to Christ through word'n deed alike, but ultimately through the power o' His Holy Spirit.

Others in the congregation, including Amy, rise and leave through different exits. Soon, only a couple of people, including Mary Ann, remain besides Rog, who still stands near the pulpit, and Marla. Rog's coat is open and his shirt bulges. The stage lights go down, remain that way for a moment, then come back up. Now, no one remains but Rog and Marla. Marla stands, walks to him, places a gentle hand on his shoulder, smiles again at him, then turns and leaves LS. Tears streak Rog's face. He glances at Marla as she leaves, but stands like a statue.

JAKE, *re-entering the sanctuary from RS, speaking in a tight voice to Rog*. Well, looks like I lost myself a church an' a career today, son.

ROG: I don't understand.

JAKE, *walking to the lectern and picking up his Bible, then stepping down to Rog*: Other elders voted four-to-two to fire me.

ROG, *stunned*: But—you built this church, this church *is* you.

JAKE: Aw, this church, any true church, is the church o' Jesus Christ. *He places a gentle hand on Rog's shoulder.* I serve at His pleasure, son. I been askin' the Lord in recent months fer better understandin' what He wants me to do in every area o' my life, an' how He wants me to think an' believe. Well I think He may be showin' me He's done with me here.

ROG: But half the people will leave with you.

JAKE: I don't think so, son, not after today. But thank ya.

ROG, *greatly troubled*: Well I—I would. I—I— *Jake's eyebrows arch, upon spotting explosives poking out from Rog's shirt collar.* I—came here today to destroy this church, Pastor Jake. *Jake is speechless.* As you began to speak, I was about to—do it. *His head drops and he begins to sob softly.* God forgive me.

JAKE: But I, I don't—

ROG: It is true that I came from Iraq, that my family was killed, and that I was sponsored here by a wealthy man from Fallujah. But— *Tears well out of his eyes.* —the Americans killed my family—and half the other people in my neighborhood—with a rocket. A rocket that I found a piece of which said Pantheon Corporation, Pastor Jake. The man who sponsored me indeed dealt with the Americans, but he secretly supported the insurgency after his own family was killed when an American tank destroyed his house by mistake when it was firing back at snipers in an adjacent dwelling.

JAKE, *staring at him, uncomprehending*: But—why—why attack us, your friends?

ROG: You weren't my friends, at least to start with, Pastor. I know enough about America to know that if it wasn't for the evangelical churches and their pastors, the armies of your empire would not even be in Iraq. *He stares away and his voice drops.* Bush would not even have been re-elected. *After a moment, he looks back at Jake.* I was so sure I was right, I was so devoted to Allah and to helping bring down the Great Satan. When the news announced my blowing up your church, that was the signal for others to blow up other targets.

JAKE: What? What other targets?

ROG: All I know is they were big targets, in Dallas. Al Qaeda knows no one hates them more than the Texans, and they consider Dallas the most Texan of any city.

JAKE: So—did you change your mind?

ROG: The—love that you and others—Emily, Shane— *Pause.* Tommy O'Rourke. And others. The love you all showed me, I did not expect that at all. It was how you Americans say, a small voice in back of my head started speaking to me something different than I had been believing. I thought the only way I could get rid of the hate I had for—what happened to my family—was to destroy American families. But that hate, it was driving me mad. Then I heard you teach about Jesus so many times and one of the things I kept hearing in your words was that believing in Jesus was the only way to get rid of hate and anger forever. But I thought, how could these people say they believe that, then turn right around and hate people like me? I got so confused. So finally I thought that Jesus was true but you Americans had dis-distorted Him and misunderstood Him and that you weren't Christians or even good people. But I could not truly believe that either because so many people helped me so much, even—Mr. Hightower. I decided to go ahead and—do what I was going to do, before I became more confused. But I chose a day I thought Emily would not be here— *His voice chokes.* —because she has

always been the kindest person to me and I saw how she helps the little black girl when that girl can do nothing for her. Then when I saw Emily here, I was upset, but I thought I had to go ahead and do it. But then when you—when you preached what you did, about how Jesus and His Church and you weren't in favor of war and killing, and I saw you kept preaching even though you knew you were in big trouble. *A sob chokes out of him.* I began to think maybe I was finally seeing that Christianity *was* real, and real here in America too, at least in some places. *He begins to weep. Emily walks back into the church from LS.* Then I saw that—that blonde-headed girl at the front. I don't know who she was, I have never seen her before, and she did not say one word to me, but just when I was about to—when I was deciding whether I was going to go ahead and do it or not—she—she looked at me like—like—

JAKE: Like what Rog?

ROG: Like—she was an angel, Pastor Jake. I felt the hate leave my heart—and the sword leave my hand. And I knew I couldn't hurt anybody—and I knew Jesus was real and what He said was true. *He looks around.* Where did she go?

JAKE: I don't know, Rog. I've never seen her before either.

EMILY, *walking toward them*: Blonde-headed girl? I saw—Shane said—Dad, what happened?

Rog looks at Jake, wondering what he will say.

JAKE, *tears shining in his own eyes, smiling, as he puts an arm around Rog*: Darlin', I think maybe Rog got all the way in with Jesus today.

EMILY: Really? Oh Rog! *She throws an arm around him in an affectionate side hug.* That's wonderful! Praise God!

JAKE: In fact, why don't we pray about that right now, y'all?

ROG: But—

JAKE: What, buddy?

ROG: But—if Jesus is even anything like the Bible says He is—I— *His voice chokes up again.* —He would never have me.

JAKE, *laughing, good-naturedly*: Ah, Rog, don't you worry 'bout that, now. We all in the same boat you are. *He closes his eyes.* Rog, go ahead and pray to the Lord with whatever words you feel.

Rog hesitates, then closes his eyes.

ROG: Lord, I'm sorry for all— *He chokes back more sobs.* —all the hate I've had in my heart for so long. But I—I believe in you, Lord, just like Pastor Jake always preaches. I know I do now. And—I pray you'll help me live like Jesus like so many of the people that have—helped me so much since I've come to this church and town. And that you'll give me the strength to help my own people back—home. They have been so hurt for so long. . . .

ACT IX

Scene Three

Rankin house, day. Shane, Emily, Sharmonique, Rog, and Jake sit around the dining table, eating and laughing. It is reminiscent of earlier scenes of the full Rankin family.

SHANE: But Colt *Sha-han*? He was the wildest of us all.

EMILY: I thought he was your best friend.

SHANE: Well, he was, I guess, all the way back, but—we sorta went are separate ways. I ain't headed for the mission field! *He stuffs his mouth with food, and talks with it full.* Look out, Em, he may want to take you there with him! One thing 'bout ole Colt, when he gets his mind on somethin', he don't usually let go!

EMILY: Oh you shut up! *She turns to Sharmonique and Rog.* Don't y'all listen to him. He's just jealous cuz no decent girl'll look his direction now!

SHANE: Hey! *His cell phone rings. He gets up, pulls it out of his pocket, steps away from the table, and speaks into it, quietly.* Hello? *Pause.* Oh—hey.

JAKE: Sam told me couple guys roughed Colt up tryin' to git his sign 'way from 'im at a war protest in Austin.

EMILY: Yeah, he got a bloody nose but they didn't get his sign.

JAKE: Hmm.

SHANE: What? *Pause.* You're shi— *He glances around at the table.* —you're kiddin' me. *Pause.* Good gosh. Where is he? *Pause.* Really. God . . . Alright, yeah, holler when ya get in. *He pockets his cell, returns to the table, and sits down. He remains motionless for a moment as everyone stares at him, then he eats more food.*

JAKE: Who was that, son?

SHANE: Josh Hightower's cousin Ben. *Beat.* Josh's chopper got shot down outside Ramadi. He's gonna make it, but—

JAKE: But what?

SHANE: Lost part o' his, uh—he took a bad head wound.

Emily gasps, Jake groans, then the table is silent as Shane chews.

JAKE: How bad?

SHANE: He— *Pause*. They don't think he's gonna be, that's he gonna have his full—that'll he'll, you know, be able to uh—it's gonna be a struggle for 'im mentally. *The back of Emily's hand goes to her mouth.* Miz Hightower—sounds like she's pretty ticked off—at Mr. Hightower. *His eating and the others' silence resume.*

EMILY: Shane? *Pause*. When was the last time you cried?

SHANE: What?

EMILY: When was the last time you cried—for somebody, for anything?

JAKE: Em?

Shane stops chewing and stares into space, thinking.

SHANE: I don't remember. Sometime 'fore we lit up Fallujah I guess.

EMILY, *haltingly*: Why not since then?

When he looks again at her, his eyes have the same chilling blank sheen as when Holt introduced him at the church.

SHARMONIQUE: I want to watch Hannah Montana! *She jumps up from her seat and hurries toward the TV. Shane rises, still chewing, and follows her.*

SHARMONIQUE, *grabbing the TV remote, then handing it to Shane*: I need to go to the bathroom first. *She leaves LS. Shane clicks on the TV.*

TV COMMENTATOR, *off-stage*: She believed deeply that the families of civilians killed by the U.S. should receive compensation. She forcefully argued that the U.S. government had a duty to all innocents injured by its weapons, especially children who needed urgent medical care from decent hospitals.

SHANE: Hey, it's—

TV COMMENTATOR, *off-stage*: So, when nearly every human rights organization on earth, even some who labor in the world's most dangerous places, cleared out, *she* began

going door-to-door—first in Afghanistan, then in Iraq—determined to learn of the nameless, faceless legions of Iraqis injured, maimed, killed, missing from the war.

SHANE, *disturbed*: Oh my—oh no—

TV COMMENTATOR, *off-stage*: In the end, her winsome but relentless devotion to the forgotten and the defenseless, persuaded the United States Congress to send tens of millions of dollars to the survivors of Iraqi civilians killed or injured in the war. It won the hearts of Iraqi Red Crescent officials, U.S. military commanders and politicians, the Iraqi people, and American soldiers alike. United States Senator Patrick Leahy eulogized her for her giving so much of herself for so many around the world and for showing the people of Afghanistan and Iraq the most compassionate and generous side of the American character—the side we would all like to think we ourselves embody.

SHANE, *shaking his head, growing distraught*: No, no God—please—

TV COMMENTATOR, *off-stage*: Many who never heard her name now mourn the loss of vivacious, blonde-headed Californian Marla Ruzicka, 28 years young, whom some are calling “The American Saint,” killed yesterday by an exploding roadside bomb outside Baghdad.

SHANE: *screaming, dropping the remote, sobbing, clinching his fists*: No, no! Not her too! Everyone—decent! Everyone good! Dammit to hell! *As Emily, Jake, and Rog stare speechlessly at him, he turns and rushes weeping LS from the house.*

Emily rises from her chair and hurries toward the TV.

EMILY, *gasping in shock and pointing at the TV*: Her!

TELEVISION ANNOUNCER, *off stage*: Not everyone thought highly of Marla Ruzicka, however, or appreciated her efforts to aid the wounded, maimed, orphaned, widowed, displaced, and homeless victims of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Emily rushes LS from the house after Shane. Jake and Rog rise from their chairs and walk toward the TV. Jake picks up the remote.

ROG, *staggered*: But—it’s the angel—from church.

TELEVISION ANNOUNCER, *off-stage*: One conservative female commentator calls her a false heroine, an activist bimchette, a treasonous Barbie who aided Islamic terrorists. She suggests the murder of Marla Ruzicka was poetic justice.

Jake clicks off the TV. He turns to Rog, bewildered.

JAKE: It did look like her—but how—

ROG: It *was* her, Pastor Jake. I would remember her face anywhere—her—love. I knew her name before, but not her face.

JAKE: What do you mean, Rog?

ROG: Our people—everywhere—spoke of the Angel of Mercy who walked among the poor and lowly, comforted the mothers who lost babies, played with the little boys and girls who lost arms and legs, held the children too terrified to speak.

JAKE: Angel of—

ROG: It—it was her, Pastor Jake. *His voice cracks and tears fill his eyes, but a smile of wonderment breaks out across his face.* The girl in the church—*she* was the Angel of Mercy.

They stare for a moment at one another.

JAKE: Son, you know we have some people we need to go see.

ROG, *nodding*: The only two men I knew connected to—what I almost did—are dead, have been dead, for months. The Habibs I've been staying with, they have no idea. They are good Christians.

JAKE: That won't, uh, satisfy some folks.

ROG: Jesus will lead me where I need to go.

JAKE: Even if that's to—prison—or back to Iraq?

ROG, *summoning his conviction*: Especially if it's one of those. *Pause.* Pastor Jake? I like the Habibs, but I do not wish to move to California with them.

JAKE, *putting a hand on Rog's shoulder*: Whatever happens, that chair there'll always be yours. Whenever you're here. An' if you're not. But fer now, we need to get about the business o' keepin' ya in it if we can.

ROG: Thank you, sir. *They give each other a bear hug, then pull back.* Well, my bicycle's outside and I am supposed to meet Mrs. Habib at their house down the road to help her make Easter decorations for the third graders' Sunday School class. Pastor Jake? They want to leave the church with you gone and so do I.

JAKE: Rog, y'all stay put and be faithful to the Lord in His work there.

ROG: But what will you do?

JAKE: Oh I 'spect I'll land on my feet. But Rog—I'll not have a part in any feuding with any o' the folks still there.

ROG: If you start a new church or go to another one, a lot of people are coming with you.

JAKE: Well for now you remember what I said, okay? My work at Crooked Trail may be done, but the Lord's ain't, an' yours better not be either, hear?

ROG: Yes sir.

JAKE: Good. Glad ya caught Christianity from us, but that dudn't mean ya need to catch all the ways we practice it. *Rog laughs.* Rog, better let me pick ya up at the Habibs in a few minutes so we can go start those visits we need to make. Gonna start with an ole buddy o' mine who's a former United States Attorney. *Rog nods slowly.* He's expectin' us at five.

ROG: Yes sir, see you in a few minutes. *He turns and leaves LS.*

Jake stands alone for a moment and looks around.

JAKE: Sharmonique?

SHARMONIQUE, *off-stage*: I'm taking a nap, Pastor Jake.

JAKE: Okay, honey, I'm goin' outside to fetch Emily. *He stands for a moment longer, then shakes his head, half-smiling.* Amazing. *He exits LS and the stage goes dark.*

ACT IX

Scene Four

We hear the sounds of the Texas outdoors in spring—birds chirp, a dog barks once or twice in the distance. As the stage lights rise again, the bright backdrop of a blue sky, sun, and dogwood trees in blossom appears. Shane and Emily walk left to right across the forestage, Emily still slightly limping.

EMILY: Best memories of my life are out here, when we used to run and play, then when we rode the ponies, then the horses. Even better'n—basketball. *She stops.* Daddy said watchin' us play out here was his best memories too. *Shane stops, too, but says nothing. She looks at him.* You okay? *He stares back, his face resuming its spooky glint. For a moment they are silent. Her voice is soft and solemn when it sounds.* Shane—what happened to you over there? *His face grows sad and he looks down.*

SHANE, *after a moment*: I had so many—things—I wanted to do. Help people. Be what folks looked up to me as an' thought I was. *Pause.* But now—sometimes I don't

know if I'm here or back—over there. An' I freeze and I'm afraid case I'm over there and stuff'll start happenin' again. *His eyes squeeze shut, he grimaces as if in pain, and he gasps.* God Em—God.

EMILY, *grasping his arms softly with her hands*: Shane—what happened that day when you saw Sharmonique in her new church dress we bought her?

SHANE: I— *He half sighs, half gasps.* I—she— *His brow furrows and he grimaces in concentration.* I—thought it was someone else.

EMILY: Someone else?

SHANE: Someone—another little girl—I knew—over—there.

EMILY: Over in Iraq? *He does not respond.* Who was she? Where is she now?

He stares at her, his face wreathed in turmoil, and his shoulders slump, his entire body seems to, as despair covers his face.

SHANE, *whispering*: She's gone. *His face screws up in torment, and each word grows in weight and pain.* We shouldn't have to—it ain't Christian—I can't—get—away from—over there, Em. I keep seein' 'em.

EMILY: Who?

SHANE: All of 'em—Billy Bob Cartwright—Rodriguez—Rev Jasper—Sergeant Custis—Ali the boy interpreted for us—the little—girl—and her—family. *Breath rushes from him and he stands silent, hunched over, spent. She stares at him, her chin quivering.* All—gone. *He falls to his knees, spent.*

EMILY, *looking into his lowered face, grabbing it with her hands, staring into his eyes, and speaking slowly and with more conviction than we have ever seen from her*: Shane Rankin, you are my hero. You have always been my hero.

He stares vacantly back, his face shining again. Her chin quivering, tears spilling out of her eyes and running down her cheeks, she cradles his fragile head in her arms, then rocks it like a baby. She begins to warble out the lyrics to the beautiful old gospel hymn, "On the Sea of Galilee."

EMILY, *singing, her voice thin and quavering*: Am I a soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb? And shall I fear to own His cause or blush to speak His name? On the sea—

SHANE, *quietly, haltingly at first, giving the refrain*: --The sea

EMILY, *singing*: Of Galilee—

SHANE, *singing, a little stronger*: --of Galilee.

EMILY, *singing*: My Jesus is walking on the sea. On the sea—

SHANE, *singing, stronger yet, more confident*: --the sea the sea.

EMILY, *singing*: Of Galilee—

SHANE, *singing, right with her now*: --of Galilee.

EMILY, *singing*: My Jesus is walking on the sea.

She holds his head to her breast, then he stirs and raises it.

SHANE: When I saw—the angel on TV—

EMILY: Shane, I saw her before too.

SHANE: They put—God put—me with her to guard her when she came to Fallujah, after we—after it—I think He had her guardin' *me*, though. When she went door to door, those who still had doors, checkin' on who was hurt'n who was gone. The way she talked to the people, the old folks, the children, held 'em, cried with 'em. *Beat*. The way she talked to— *He pauses, his throat tightening*. —me. *He chews his lips as silent tears spill from his eyes*. She was like a white light shinin' into a world o' black midnight.

EMILY: She came to our house one night—to see me. She told me—not to give up.

He stares at her, baffled. Then his faculties start to click again and he wipes his eyes and stands up.

SHANE: I been thinkin' maybe— *His voice cracks*. God ain't through with me after all. Maybe He can still make somethin' good from my life after all's happened. *Pause*. After all I've done. I been thinkin'— *He looks her in the eyes*. --maybe to go back—to Iraq, to—Fallujah—but with the gospel, Em, not with a gun, you know, like they did it'n the Bible.

EMILY: Oh yes, Shane!

SHANE, *tears welling over again*: I know I'm not—ready—yet. But I think I could be, someday, with you—and Daddy—helpin' me. I think—that girl—maybe God sent 'er to us so we wouldn't lose hope and give up.

EMILY: Oh yes, Shane, yes, I think He did! *She throws her arms around his neck and hugs him and laughs. She pulls back*. Oh Shane did you ever think maybe He's just started usin' us? *He nods, a real smile creasing his handsome face for the first time in a long time*. I love you Shane.

SHANE: I love you too, Em. *They turn and start to walk right to left, back to where they came. Emily's cell phone rings. She stops, pulls it out, and answers it.*

EMILY, *speaking into the phone*: Hello? *Pause. She looks at Shane, surprised. Hey. She flinches and pulls her ear away from the phone, which emits a loud voice. She covers the receiver with her one hand and whispers to Shane. Kylie Hightower. Surprise—she's screamin' at me. She shrugs her shoulders at him in resignation and half-smiles. The voice continues and something surprises Emily. She speaks again into the cell. What? Pause. Why, sure, sure. She looks again at Shane, confused, her eyes widening. Sure, sweetie, I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Sure, no problem. Everything's gonna be alright, Kylie—God's gonna take care of you, sweetie, I promise.*

She puts away the cell.

SHANE: Kylie Hightower?

EMILY: Yeah—

SHANE: Sounded like she was yellin'. Y'all still hate each other?

EMILY, *embarrassed, amazed*: Yeah, we do—we did. She was screamin', crazy-like, that Josh—she overheard a military doctor tell her dad that Josh is gonna be—a vegetable for life. *Shane bites his lip. She said . . .*

SHANE: What, Em?

EMILY: She said—I'm the only one she trusts. Can you believe that? *Shane laughs. What? Beat. What!*

The strumming guitars of Peter, Paul, and Mary's haunting rendition of Bob Dylan's famed folk song "Blowin' in the Wind" begin as Shane and Emily resume walking

SHANE: You said it, sis—git ready for God to start usin' ya! *Birds chirp and dogwood blossoms flutter after and around them through the air, right to left. Dang—Colt Shan-han? Gall—gimme a break. Wildest—*

EMILY, *laughing*: I know, I heard, wildest one o' ya all. But I told ya, he's changed.

SHANE: Well I ain't changed too much not to break 'is scrawny neck if he tries any funny bidness with ya.

EMILY: Shane, you be nice to him!

PETER, PAUL, AND MARY, *off stage, singing the first verse of lyrics to "Blowin' in the Wind" as Shane and Emily continue walking, then exit LS*: How many roads must a

man walk down before you call him a man? Yes, 'n how many seas must a white dove sail before she sleeps in the sand? Yes, 'n how many times must the cannon balls fly before they're forever banned? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

The stage is empty for a moment as the guitars sound the prelude to verse two of "Blowin' in the Wind." Then Jake enters the forestage from RS as Peter, Paul, and Mary sing verse two. He holds Daisy's diary in one hand. Dogwood blossoms continue to flutter right to left across the stage. Jake looks after Shane and Emily and nods, smiling.

PETER, PAUL, AND MARY, *off stage, singing*: How many years can a mountain exist before it's washed to the sea? Yes, 'n how many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free? Yes, 'n how many times can a man turn his head, pretending he just doesn't see? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

JAKE, *looking upward*: Every place's full again at the table, honey. *He walks off LS as the guitars play the prelude to verse three of "Blowin' in the Wind." Dogwood blossoms continue to flutter right to left across the stage.*

Daisy enters the forestage from RS as Peter, Paul, and Mary sing verse three of "Blowin' in the Wind." Dogwood blossoms continue to flutter right to left across the stage. Daisy watches after Jake.

PETER, PAUL, AND MARY, *off stage, singing*: How many times must a man look up before he can see the sky? Yes, 'n how many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry? Yes, 'n how many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

Daisy smiles and nods in the direction her family walked, then turns and walks off RS and

The Curtain falls.

EMMYLOU HARRIS and THE PEASALL SISTERS, *singing* (Lyrics to “On the Sea of Galilee”), *off-stage, as the cast takes their bows, and continuing after*: Am I soldier of the cross, a follower of the lamb, and shall I fear to own his cause or blush to speak his name? On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea. On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea.

Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas. On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea. On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea.

There shall I bathe my weary soul in seas of heavenly rest and not a wave of trouble roll across my peaceful breast. On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea. On the sea (the sea the sea) of Galilee (of Galilee), my Jesus is walking on the sea.